

The Strange Disappearance of Sterling A. Brown: Literature, Social Science and the Representation of Black Americans, 1930-1945

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I declare that the following thesis is my own work.

Abstract

This thesis examines the strange career of Sterling Brown, a poet, literary critic and civil rights activist who was highly acclaimed between 1930 and 1945. In this period, he chose to sideline his creative writing and involved himself instead in social research. He turned to folklore, the Federal Writers' Project, the Carnegie Myrdal Study of the Negro in America, and to reportage of the wartime South. This thesis is distinctive in examining these endeavours and provides new perspectives on Brown's efforts to transform the national discourse about black Americans.

Increased migration of black southerners to northern cities after World War I led to a dialogue about race relations, black identity, and the future of the South that intensified during the Great Depression and the Second World War. Brown was central to debates during the New Negro Renaissance, within the Popular Front, and in investigations of black life sponsored by the New Deal government and philanthropic foundations. This thesis argues that the projects in which Brown involved himself in these years expose a tangled interracial debate on whose opinion would dominate in the representation of black character, identity, and culture.

Brown and his black contemporaries in the social sciences influenced the building and dissemination of knowledge about African Americans within a challenging context. Their shared efforts to change the national dialogue about the 'race problem' have been under examined. Prevented by segregation and discrimination from gaining access to a wide audience, their desire to surmount these barriers helps to explain why Brown made this strange career choice. This thesis demonstrates that where he differed from his intellectual allies was in his conviction that black culture was a dynamic force that was as important as the 'harder' components of politics, class or economics. Brown's prescient insights made him a founding figure in the fields of American cultural history and black studies.

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He threw the hand grenades back
With a outshoot drop.
An' evvytime he threw
They was one less cop.

The Strange Career of Sterling A. Brown: Literature, Social Science and the Representation of Black Americans, 1930-1945

Introduction

This study explores the strange career of Sterling Allen Brown. Described by critic Henry Louis Gates as “the last of the great ‘race men,’ the Afro-American Men of Letters,”¹ Brown was at his creative peak as a poet, literary critic and civil rights activist between the onset of the Great Depression and the end of the Second World War. Through his association with the New Negro Renaissance (circa 1919-1935), he was well known across black and white literary, academic and intellectual circles and his reputation spread into the black elite and beyond.

Brown’s poetry was published in a range of black journals and anthologies in the late 1920s, and his first collection *Southern Road* appeared to widespread acclaim in 1932. He was admired as an outspoken, evenhanded and insightful critic, reviewing a wide range of material by white and black intellectuals who were writing about race relations. Brown was deeply interested in African American folklore both in terms of providing a more accurate picture of black life and as a creative well for his poetry and this drew him into the world of professional folklorists in the 1930s. He began to consider new ways of collecting and understanding black folklore and history. His interest in the representation of African Americans as citizens and active participants in mainstream American life rather than as peculiar stereotypes, led him to efforts to ensure the accurate representation of their lives as Editor of the Negro Affairs section of the Federal Writers’ Project. The Federal Writers’ Project was established in 1935 by the Roosevelt administration to provide employment to journalists, writers, historians and other white-collar workers as part of the Works Progress Administration’s relief programmes. A similar impulse was behind his agreement to participate in the immense Carnegie Study of the Negro in America; and to accept a publishing deal to collate a

¹ Henry Louis Gates, "Book Review: *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown: The National Poetry Series*," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, 1 (1981).

black response to white southern liberal journalist Jonathan Daniels' travelogue, *A Southerner Discovers the South*. Hence, during the 1930s, he turned away from creative writing and towards innovative social research. Whether making incursions into folklore, sociology, history or a sort of journalistic ethnography, Brown's penetrating eye fixed on the way race relations operated across America, especially in the economically and democratically retrograde South.

It is a measure of Brown's status in the cultural milieu of the period that he was selected as the most senior African American on the staff of the Federal Arts Projects, but his reputation can also be gauged by the fact that he was awarded both a Guggenheim and a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1937 and 1942 respectively. However, from the 1950s, Brown disappeared almost entirely from public view. He did not publish any new collections of poetry or prose and his voice, so recently articulate and forceful, was less often heard. He did not resurface until the 1970s, when leading figures in the Black Arts Movement recognised his talent as a poet and critic, published his work and looked to him for guidance.

This thesis explores Brown's strange decision to abandon his creative aspirations in the 1930s and to instead immerse himself in a series of sociologically oriented projects. I examine his involvement in the study of black folklore, music and history; his participation in the production of state guide books, historical and sociological examinations of black (and white) lives; and the part he played in developing new approaches to capturing the contemporary black experience. Historians have, in the main, investigated Brown's accomplishments within the context of the development of black literature, but this restricts our understanding of both the man and the period. I examine the extent to which Brown's objectives were shared with other intellectuals (black and white) collaborating on these projects. I situate Brown alongside the major black social scientists in this period, who were attempting to build and disseminate knowledge about black communities and race relations within a segregated and racist society that minimised their intellectual contribution and undermined their authority.

This biographical study of Brown's involvement in projects within the social sciences in the 1930s exposes the depth and complexity of the efforts of Brown and his colleagues in the period more effectively than a general historical survey of these endeavours. In so doing, this thesis seeks to add to and deepen the knowledge about Brown within a generation of black scholars whose contributions were ignored or misinterpreted by scholars of the Black Arts Movement and only selectively rediscovered by intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century.

Sterling A. Brown, the New Negro Renaissance and the Popular Front

Brown's most prolific period as a poet, critic and (albeit not professionally trained) social scientist began during the New Negro Renaissance (circa 1919-1935), continuing through the Popular Front (circa 1934-1939) and the Second World War.² The New Negro Renaissance will be considered more fully in chapter one of this dissertation and the Popular Front recurs in subsequent thematic chapters. However, it is necessary to discuss both movements briefly here in order to set the context in relation to the rise, fall and resurgence of Brown's public profile.

Since the 1980s, Brown has been recognised as a key figure within the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance. As migration to New York (and other northern cities) increased after the First World War, black southerners brought their own forms of religion and entertainment to transform Harlem. Black writers such as Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes were drawn to the city where race leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson promoted black artistic efforts through journals and at interracial

² George Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6. Hutchinson describes a broad consensus amongst scholars that the movement began after the first world war and "continued well into the 1930s."; See Denning's discussion on periodisation in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 21-32.

gatherings, where publishers mingled with young black talent.³ Some participants (including Brown himself) denounced the term 'Harlem Renaissance' as inadequate to describe a movement that reached far beyond Manhattan to Chicago, Washington and other cities with growing black populations, but in general it has been accepted that much of the creative energy and institutional support for the movement (for example, publishing companies) was centred in New York.⁴

Brown avoided close association with the Harlem scene and was not based in New York but nevertheless he became a rising star as his poetry appeared in black journals and collections. He refused to subscribe to the notion that African American art should serve as propaganda to further the struggle for civil rights as promoted by W. E. B. Du Bois as editor of African American journal *The Crisis*.⁵ However, he saw his poetry and criticism as part of the drive to secure greater equality for black Americans through exposing stereotypes and addressing the misrepresentation of the race.

Neither did Brown follow the trend in the wider American arts community, which moved towards a modernism that explored form as much as content and had a new interest in primitive cultures (for example, Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha.")⁶ He anticipated later criticisms of the voyeuristic elements of the New Negro Renaissance, which sought to depict African Americans as unfettered, sexualised beings operating in a decadent cabaret culture.⁷ Brown was influenced by two strands within American culture, firstly the social realism and exploration of local communities and types explored by Robert

³ David L. Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1981), 50-88.

⁴ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 6.

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Review of *Nigger Heaven*," *The Crisis* 33 (1926): 81-82.

⁶ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism : Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59-76. According to North, "linguistic mimicry" and "racial masquerade" were "strategies without which modernism could not have arisen." Writers like Stein were drawn to the black voice because it used language in a new and unfamiliar way.

⁷ This was a view that Brown shared with later critics of the New Negro Renaissance. See for example, Amrit Singh's argument that whites saw Negroes only as primitive stereotypes and blacks learned that success meant playing up to those misleading clichés. Amrit Singh, "Black-White Symbiosis: Another Look at the Literary History of the 1920s," in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 31.

Frost, Carl Sandburg and Edgar Masters;⁸ secondly, the dialect, folkways, music and stories of southern blacks. Leading critics of the day, including the influential editor of *Modern American Poetry*, Louis Untermeyer, and the godfather of the Harlem Renaissance movement, Alain Locke, voiced their admiration for Brown's skilful use of vernacular language and of dialect.⁹ Black dialect had been increasingly shunned by middle-class African Americans due to its associations with slavery and with the poor, uneducated masses of the South; Brown was one of a handful of writers incorporating dialect into their work at this time, (other notable exceptions were Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes).¹⁰ Brown reclaimed dialect as a vivid expression of black cultural strength.

Brown's poetry captured the struggles of southern blacks who lived under rigid segregation, and experienced severe debt and poverty through the sharecropping and crop lien systems. He also wrote about the discrimination and Jim Crow practices that were hardening as southern migrants struggled to start new lives in the cities.¹¹ As the 1930s unfolded, he would be increasingly drawn away from his own creative expression and into the arena of social scientists who were attempting to understand how race relations operated and might change in the context of social upheaval and economic distress.

The election of Franklin Roosevelt and the introduction of the Democrat's New Deal brought some hope and alleviation of distress to Americans.¹² Although critics have suggested that the New Deal did little for blacks or

⁸ Joanne V. Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 26-30.

⁹ Alain Locke, "Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk-Poet," in *Negro. Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (London: 1934).

¹⁰ North, *The Dialect of Modernism : Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*, 11.

¹¹ See, for example, Sterling A. Brown, "Foreclosure," in *Ebony and Topaz : A Collectanea*, ed. Charles S. Johnson (New York: Published by Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life : National Urban League, 1927); "Dark of the Moon," in *Folk-Say; a Regional Miscellany; 1930*, ed. B. A. Botkin (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1930); "Strong Men," *Opportunity* 8, 9 (1930); "New St. Louis Blues," in *Folk-Say; a Regional Miscellany; 1931*, ed. B. A. Botkin (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1931); "Old King Cotton," in *Folk-Say; a Regional Miscellany; 1931*, ed. B. A. Botkin (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1931); "Children of the Mississippi," *Opportunity* 9 (1931); "Sister Lou," *Opportunity* 10 (1932). Reprinted in Sterling A. Brown and Michael S. Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 70, 31, 56, 68, 64, 66, 54.

¹² Although unemployment figures stayed as high as ten million until the Second World War, the introduction of the minimum wage, public housing programmes, farm assistance, the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act), the Tennessee Valley Authority, and social security heralded the beginning of an interventionist style of government ready to involve itself as never before in the affairs of its citizens.

ethnic minorities, there was a feeling that the state had at least acknowledged some responsibility for the welfare of its people.¹³ Some race leaders, such as Walter White, Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), believed that the key objective for black Americans must be to ensure that the New Deal's efforts to recover from the Depression benefited black Americans as much as whites.¹⁴ Other African Americans, working and middle-class, felt that neither the timid legal strategy of the NAACP nor Roosevelt's New Deal would improve their situation and looked to the Left as a stronger advocate for racial equality. Many, including Sterling Brown, were encouraged to do so when the International Labor Defense mobilised swiftly to defend the nine black "Scottsboro boys" who were hastily convicted of raping two white women on a train in Alabama in 1931, whilst the NAACP prevaricated, concerned about how the case would affect perceptions of the organisation.¹⁵ Although Brown and his closest allies at Howard University (economist Abram Harris, political scientist Ralph Bunche and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier) did not join the Communist Party (CPUSA), they were considered to be radicals in the early 1930s because they believed that the best way to achieve race equality was by deemphasising racial issues and instead focusing on class and economics and encouraging working class interracial alliances.

This drew Brown into the broad movement of the Popular Front, which historian Michael Denning has described as an independent interracial social democratic movement in which working class activists, second generation immigrants, African Americans, and refugees from fascism in Europe developed a shared set of values in the 1930s. Anti-racism and anti-lynching activism comprised central elements, along with social democratic politics and anti-colonialism.¹⁶ Within the Popular Front, left-aligned individuals and

¹³ Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in *Towards a New Past : Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 263-88.

¹⁴ Kenneth Robert Janken, *White : The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2003), 201.

¹⁵ James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 24-35; Janken, *White : The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP*, 148-56.

¹⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xvi-xvii, 39, 9.

groups worked alongside members of the Communist Party to promote social and political change.

The protest novels of writers such as Tillie Olson and Richard Wright, the songs of Billie Holliday and the radio programmes and films of Orson Welles would become iconic forms of American literature and art, and the decade was one in which ideas were formed and tested, ideas that would influence American culture for the rest of the century.¹⁷ Brown was an active participant in the Popular Front and his radical poetry of the period was published in a range of magazines. These poems dealt with the preoccupations of the Popular Front: lynching and Jim Crow, and the potential of a powerful working class alliance across race lines.

Whilst the Depression brought about an interest in ordinary working class people manifested in proletarian literature, it also generated a desire to document America. Social documentary was undertaken to understand “conditions of a certain time and place” that were considered to be “man-made” and therefore could be improved and changed.¹⁸ This was particularly the case in relation to the South, and President Roosevelt considered the region to be “the nation's No. 1 economic problem.”¹⁹ Sociologists such as Charles S. Johnson and Howard Odum recorded and analysed information that demonstrated the desperate southern economic situation, and their research was supplemented with qualitative studies such as those underway on caste and class by Allison Davis and Burleigh and Mary Gardner in Natchez, Mississippi, and John Dollard in Indianola.²⁰

As I will demonstrate in chapter one, Brown had as much, if not more, contact with social scientists in this period as with those on the literary scene and in this period, black and white scholars often moved between these two

¹⁷ Ibid., 117-18.

¹⁸ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago [etc.]: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 20.

¹⁹ John T. and Gerhard Peters Woolley, "Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Message to the Conference on Economic Conditions of the South" 4 July 1938," <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15670>.

²⁰ Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Allison Davis et al., *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1941); John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1949).

intellectual worlds. His interest in the representation of African Americans extended beyond literature and into history, sociology and journalism. Furthermore, like many intellectuals of the period, he was deeply interested in the future of the South. These factors, combined with the opportunities afforded by his reputation as a leading authority on African American issues, led him into the projects that will be examined within the thesis.

Literature Review

After the Second World War, Brown virtually disappeared from the national scene. There has been little analysis within the historiography of the reasons for his obliteration from the public record from the 1950s to the 1970s. It might appear that the reasons for his disappearance are obvious. The opportunities brought about by the New Negro Renaissance were all but extinguished by the Great Depression. The Popular Front was severely damaged by the Soviet Nazi pact of August 1939, as many left-wing intellectuals distanced themselves from communism. As America prepared for war, the great wave of national concern about poverty and the willingness of the government and of radical intellectuals to experiment with imaginative solutions to the country's problems were replaced by "anticipation of combat." Journals such as the *New Republic*, which in the 1920s and 1930s had strongly advocated for radical approaches to the nation's problems, became more "wary of freewheeling debate, much less sustained criticisms of America's war objectives."²¹

As white and black southerners migrated to northern and western cities to work in the war industries in the 1940s, the hope that working class interracial struggles would change the face of American politics faded. Furthermore, literary critics such as Lionel Trilling, Clement Greenberg and Robert Warshow, who had championed left-wing causes during the 1930s, now distanced themselves from the notion of a 'People's culture.' They

²¹ Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age : American Intellectuals in 1940s and 1950s* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 8, 11.

associated the Popular Front with commercialisation and mass culture, which they considered to be sentimental and escapist.²²

America emerged from the Second World War a confident nation. Many of her poorest citizens (sharecroppers, women and blacks) benefited from the new prosperity created by the war.²³ Americans of all colours and classes focused on family life, divisions of race and class were sublimated beneath an “aura of unity,” and creating stability within the home was seen as preferable to political activism within a frightening post-atomic world.²⁴ The rise of anti-communist feeling across the nation caused a retreat from advocacy for black equality.²⁵ After the 1954 *Brown vs Board of Education* decision to desegregate the public school system, the conservative South retreated in a last defence of segregation.²⁶

Largely ignored in the 1950s and early 1960s, the radical upheavals of the late 1960s brought black intellectuals of the earlier part of the twentieth century back into the spotlight. However, the new generation of black intellectuals portrayed their predecessors as naïve victims exploited by their white contemporaries. Concentrating heavily on the New Negro Renaissance and the left-wing writing of the 1930s, they depicted black intellectuals as lacking a clear vision for their future and unable to deliver strong leadership and a definitive direction for the development of black culture.²⁷

Here it is necessary to define the terms ‘black culture’ and ‘African American culture’ as they are used within this thesis. I use the terms to describe the ways that African Americans expressed their humanity, identity and

²² Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 35, 110.

²³ Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age : American Intellectuals in 1940s and 1950s*, 5, 6.

²⁴ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound : American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 35, 110.

²⁵ Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement : "Another Side of the Story"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), ix-xi.

²⁶ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions : The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., 2000), 181-90.

²⁷ These included Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday), 272-90; Hoyt Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in *Within the Circle : An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present Day*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 199-206; Addison Gayle Jr., "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," *ibid.*, 207-12; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 49-50; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 90-97.

resistance to segregation and oppression from the seventeenth century through to the twentieth century. Within this study, the main concern is with black folk culture, encompassing the trickster tales, tall tales of heroes, jokes, and aphorisms that were created, adapted and passed on as a sustaining life force. Music and song, from small farm and plantation to city slum, is at the core of black culture including the divine (spirituals) and the secular (worksongs, hollers, the blues, ragtime and jazz). Accounts of life under slavery, “escape, resistance, and adaptation” passed on from the older generations to their children and grandchildren are also included.²⁸

Stuart Hall describes cultural identity in two ways. The first is as a shared culture arrived at from a common history and ancestry, providing a group, e.g. African Americans, with “unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.” A second way of thinking about cultural identities is that they “come from somewhere, have histories” but they are always in the process of changing and transforming. This way of considering cultural identity allows for difference and discord within a shared group identity. There is no fixed point to which a group can return to the essence of their cultural identity for it is a positioning affected by time, place, historical events and power relations.²⁹ Hence, in this study the terms black culture or African American culture refer not only to a rural folk culture but also incorporate popular culture produced in commercial, industrial and urban settings in response to the changes that occurred to millions of black American’s lives in the first half of the twentieth century.

Later critics such as Larry Neal castigated the New Negro Renaissance for failing to promote a distinctive black culture, make real connections to black struggles against oppression or speak out for the black community. Worse still, the New Negro intellectuals favoured integration, which the new critics believed was predicated on a dependent relationship with white Americans.

²⁸ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind : Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 45.

²⁹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and the Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory : A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 392-403.

The new radicals rejected integration and refused to be judged by white aesthetic criteria. Only a black critic could fully understand the black aesthetic.³⁰ Having been out of print for many years, Brown was virtually forgotten in this period and was rarely criticised by name. However, he was painfully aware that his own work to develop a black aesthetic through his groundbreaking analyses of literary stereotypes and his efforts to demonstrate the positive cultural legacy of black America were overlooked. Historian Sterling Stuckey described Brown's reaction to the cursory treatment of his work by Nathan Huggins:

... one understands his anguish when Nate Huggins ... gave short shrift to him as a poet of the blues; indeed, to him as a poet, arguing that Sterling did not expect his poetry to be taken seriously The consummate artist-scholar opposing stereotyping, he had been accused of it. The charge was damaging in part because a lot of people reading Huggins did not know Sterling's poetry or his landmark essay, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," the finest article on the subject of distorting the character of blacks.³¹

Nathan Huggins found only "a kind of self-doubt, perhaps self-hate" in the attitudes of the Renaissance's middle-class leaders. He saw in the concept of the 'New Negro,' a rejection of the black past, and shame in relation to the low behaviour of the recently arrived poor and uneducated southern migrants.³² Dancing, wild music, drinking, drugs, sexual dalliances, raw spirituals and low-down blues were frightening.³³ "Self-disgust" caused parents to steer their children away from the songs and tales of their past in the rural South, to accept spirituals in carefully arranged concerts but reject rougher work songs and blues. In the historiography, self-loathing is claimed as the trademark of a fragile black middle class that wished to draw a clear line between itself and a lower stratum of black society.

³⁰ Larry Neal and Hoyt Fuller, cited in Vincent B. Leitch, ed. *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 336.

³¹ Sterling Stuckey et al., "A Symposium on the Life and Work of Sterling Brown: With Chet Lasell, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Paula Giddings, Sterling Stuckey, Wahneema Lubiano, and Cornel West," *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998): 1038-74, 49.

³² Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 65, 49-50.

³³ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 90-97.

The belief of middle class African Americans during the New Negro Renaissance that successful works of art and literature could convince the American establishment of the intellectual capability of African Americans and hence move the race towards greater opportunity and equality also became deeply unfashionable by the 1980s. Historians criticised black leaders (including poet and activist James Weldon Johnson, sociologist Charles S. Johnson, novelist Jessie Fauset and philosopher Alain Locke), as a pitifully small and naïve elite with a delusional optimism that caused them to ignore the realities of black life and oscillate between a desire to emulate white culture or a dream of a self-definition through identification with Africa.³⁴ It was an oversimplified and ungenerous portrait of selected black leaders, which failed to differentiate between generations, or to consider the intentions of different individuals within the movement.

Brown was ignored, partly because historians before the 1990s mostly disregarded the role that folk art played in the movement. The work of Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston did not fit in with historians' dismissal of New Negro Renaissance intellectuals for their class snobbery. Folk art - the songs, stories and sayings of mainly southern blacks – was used and adapted within Brown, Hughes and Hurston's poetry and prose. They used folk expression to highlight the strengths and positive attributes of African Americans. To incorporate and acknowledge them would have knocked down one of the central criticisms made about the period, which was that the very existence of the 'New Negro' indicated the presence of racial self-hatred. Thus historian Nathan Huggins ignored evidence of the race pride of writers like Hurston and Brown, ignored the innovations in their use of dialect and southern aphorisms, ignored the ironic portrayals of black resilience in the face of white discrimination, and instead presented Brown's poetry briefly and without proper analysis:

Thus Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown were folk artists in that they explored the wealth of material that was provided by the common

³⁴ Ibid., 192; Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 8; Baker challenged these dismissals, proposing the concepts of 'mastery of form' and 'deformation of mastery' to demonstrate the ways in which writers of the period used and refused accepted forms and traditions to forward their artistic vision. Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), xvi.

people; and for both writers that meant Negroes, workers, farmers, bums, pimps, gamblers, musicians, anyone who lived his life without intentional deceit.³⁵

Negative criticism was not confined to creative writers. Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie argued that between 1930 and 1945, black intellectuals (with few exceptions) agreed that “blacks had very little identity other than a pathological one...”³⁶ This clearly links to the allegation that New Negro Renaissance writers detested the cultural practices of the lower classes, and failed to promote a strong and distinctive black culture. However, these criticisms were also directed at social scientists. Some of America’s best-known black social scientists of the twentieth century will feature in this study of Sterling Brown’s career in the 1930s and 1940s. Brown had long-lasting friendships and intellectual alliances with sociologists Charles S. Johnson at Fisk, Ira De A. Reid at Atlanta University, E. Franklin Frazier at Howard and Allison Davis who became well known as an educationalist, anthropologist and psychologist. At Howard, he would draw close to economist Abram Harris and political scientist Ralph Bunche. With the exception of a small number of intellectual biographies published in recent years,³⁷ these black social scientists have been variously neglected or pilloried by their successors. Charles S. Johnson, for example, was criticised for the close relationships he forged with white philanthropic organisations in order to fund his sociological studies.³⁸

The major criticisms, however, which I will explore in more detail within the thesis, were in relation to black (and white) social scientists’ interpretations of black culture, personality and family life. Historians largely ignored the fact that social scientists such as E. Franklin Frazier or Charles S. Johnson did not

³⁵ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 221.

³⁶ Sterling Stuckey and Joshua Leslie, "Reflections on Reflections About the Black Intellectual 1930-1945," *First World* 2, 2 (1979): 26. Stuckey’s later praise for Brown’s work indicates that he saw Brown as one of the exceptions, nevertheless, Brown and his contemporaries were overwhelmingly criticised in these years.

³⁷ Anthony M. Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Patrick J. Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson : Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); Charles P. Henry, *Ralph Bunche : Model Negro or American Other?* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil : Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

³⁸ Butler Jones, "The Tradition of Sociology Teaching in Black Colleges: The Unheralded Professionals," in *Black Sociologists : Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. James Edward Blackwell, Morris Janowitz, and National Conference on Black Sociologists (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

equate problems in black life with damaged or pathological personalities in these years. They have depicted black social scientists as espousing negative views about black life and categorising black families as dysfunctional. More recently, Daryl Michael Scott has demonstrated that this portrayal is erroneous and is based on a conflation of the arguments of these social scientists and those operating from the 1950s onwards.³⁹

A Partial Recovery

When Brown was 'recovered' from relative obscurity in the 1970s, the emphasis was on his poetry and criticism and, to some extent, his innovations in folklore.⁴⁰ Some Black Arts Movement critics looked more closely at what Brown and his contemporaries had tried to achieve and did not dismiss them so lightly. Stephen Henderson developed new tools to support the analysis of black poetry including the notion of a "soul-field:"

an historically formed, cohesive repository containing the social experiences, moral and political values, linguistic forms, religious practices, and emerging aspirations of black people in America.⁴¹

He saw the commonality between what he was trying to achieve and Sterling Brown's earlier work and encouraged Brown to come out of retirement and return to teach part-time at Howard University. Brown was respected by other key figures in the Black Arts Movement including Detroit poet and publisher Dudley Randall who published a collection of Brown's ballads *The Last Ride of Wild Bill* in 1975.⁴² In 1980, Michael S. Harper edited an

³⁹ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 41-56.

⁴⁰ John S. Wright does briefly examine how Brown fitted into the study of folklore in this period in John S. Wright, "The New Negro Poet and the Nachal Man: Sterling Brown's Folk Odyssey," *Black American Literature Forum* 23, 1 (1989): 95-105. Sterling Stuckey acknowledges the strength of Brown's evidence that slaves were able to retain essential humanity through their songs, stories, and dances and were not totally dehumanised by the structure of slavery to the extent described by Stanley Elkins. See Sterling Stuckey, *Going through the Storm : The Influence of African American Art in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4-5.

⁴¹ Stephen Henderson, cited in Leitch, ed. *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties*, 340.

⁴² Julius Eric Thompson and Dudley Randall, *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960-1995* (Jefferson, NC [u.a.: McFarland, 2005), 75-132; Dudley Randall, "Sterling Brown as Seen by Publisher Dudley Randall," in *Sterling A. Brown: A UMUM Tribute*, ed. Black History Museum Committee (1982); Sterling A. Brown, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill, and Eleven Narrative Poems* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975).

anthology of Brown's published poetry, which won the Lenore Marshall National Poetry Prize in the following year.⁴³

African American academics writing from the 1980s onward saw the centrality of Brown's ideas to the development of black literature and criticism in the twentieth century. They included Michael S. Harper, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., John Edgar Tidwell, Robert G. O'Meally, John S. Wright, Robert Steptoe, Charles H. Rowell and Cornell West, to name but an illustrious few.⁴⁴ On the publication of *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* in 1980, Henry Louis Gates celebrated Brown as a great poet who was able to meld the influence of Anglo-American poetry with black traditions to "to form a unified and complex structure of feeling, a sort of song of a racial self."⁴⁵

There have been few comprehensive studies of Sterling Brown's work. Literary critics and literary historians have undertaken most of the writing about Brown. A chapter on Brown's poetry appeared in Jean Wagner's *Black Poets of the United States* (1973), and a full-length analysis of his poetry was produced by Mark A. Sanders (1999).⁴⁶ In Joanne Gabbin's literary biography, she notes how Brown demonstrated that the more a group was oppressed in life, "the greater the degree of misrepresentation, exploitation, and justification in the literature."⁴⁷ Her main objective was to showcase Brown's achievements in establishing the black aesthetic tradition but she did include a chapter on Brown's involvement with the Federal Writers' Project. Literary historians John Edgar Tidwell, Mark A. Sanders and Steven C. Tracy have edited strong collections of Brown's writings and critical studies of his work in recent years.⁴⁸

⁴³ Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Charles H. F. Rowell, "Sterling A. Brown : A Special Issue," *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998).

⁴⁵ Gates, "Book Review: *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown: The National Poetry Series*," 39-42.

⁴⁶ Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States; from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Mark A. Sanders, *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics & the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 4-5.

⁴⁸ Sterling A. Brown and Mark A. Sanders, *A Son's Return : Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996); Sterling A. Brown, John Edgar Tidwell, and Mark A. Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy, *After Winter : Essays on the Art and Life of Sterling A. Brown* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

More recently, historians such as James Smethurst, Lawrence P. Jackson and Stacy I. Morgan have challenged the earlier emphasis on the New Negro Renaissance and shifted the focus to the social realism and cultural activism that ascended in the 1930s and continued until at least the late 1940s, and in a more embattled form beyond that to the 1960s. Smethurst sees Brown as central in the efforts of African American writers to develop a modernism that embraced a “new approach ... to vernacular-oriented poetry.”⁴⁹ Morgan includes Brown in her examination of the African American visual artists and writers who emerged in the 1930s and used social realism as a “vehicle for cultural activism.” As well as attending to Brown’s poetry, she notes the commonalities between muralists Charles White and John Biggers and Sterling Brown, in their shared interest in the political nature of folk traditions and the discord brought about migration and modernity.⁵⁰ In his panoramic study of the journey of a generation of black intellectuals, Jackson stresses Brown’s importance “as a professional advocate of black arts ... the ombudsman critic during the 1930s and early 1940s, ... a major success story in terms of the history of blacks on the FWP.”⁵¹

Literary historians have largely failed to examine why Brown chose to move away from literature and towards the social sciences during the 1930s. When his participation in projects such as the Carnegie Myrdal Study is mentioned, there is a lack of acknowledgement that Brown was not wholly successful in these efforts and little attempt to interpret the wider meaning of these events, set within the social and political context of the period.⁵² Recent studies of the Federal Arts Projects have analysed Brown’s participation. Rebecca Lauren Sklaroff concludes that the Federal Arts Projects created a space for black cultural advancement at a time when minstrel stereotypes abounded in

⁴⁹ James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

⁵⁰ Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 171, 77-79, 69-70, 90-93.

⁵¹ Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 37, 53.

⁵² There are some notable exceptions including John Edgar Tidwell, “In Defense of African American Culture: Sterling A. Brown, Gunnar Myrdal and *An American Dilemma*,” in *After Winter: Essays on the Art and Life of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 209-06.

the mainstream culture. Sharon Ann Musher sees Brown as one of a group of intellectuals in the Federal Arts Projects who “used Art as a weapon,” to change public opinion, teach class consciousness, alter self perceptions and promote racial equality. Jerrold Hirsch notes the shared objective of building cultural pluralism between black and white intellectuals in the national team responsible for the Federal Writers’ Projects across the states.⁵³ However, these studies did not provide a thorough examination of Brown’s participation.

Drawing on this literature, and on primary sources that have not been conventionally used by literary scholars or historians of the social sciences, this thesis sets out to examine the projects undertaken by Brown in the 1930s and early 1940s through which he attempted to change perceptions of African Americans, but also to develop new methodologies and approaches that could capture the reality of black lives expressed through work, play, music, talk and folklore. Through these projects, Brown came into contact with folklorists, sociologists, anthropologists and journalists. He made a strong intellectual alliance with white folklorist Benjamin Botkin, probably the strongest relationship he would form across racial lines in his lifetime. He also had contact with a wide range of black intellectuals operating in the social sciences, including social psychologist Allison Davis, economist Abram Harris, sociologists E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson, and political scientist Ralph Bunche.

This thesis sets out Brown’s efforts to change the terms of discussion about black culture and its relationship with the dominant American culture, as he moved away from poetry and literature and attempted to operate in the world of the social sciences. Brown’s central objectives as a scholar and an activist remained constant – he was attempting to change the national dialogue about black Americans. During the period black Americans were variously ignored, patronised or vilified within mainstream American culture. Brown sought to

⁵³ Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Sharon Ann Musher, "A New Deal for Art" (Columbia University, 2007); Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

bring a more balanced perspective on African American life to the widest audience possible. I explore the barriers to the formation of mutually beneficial alliances and productive dialogue across the colour line. I argue that the sweeping surveys of the Harlem Renaissance and Popular Front carried out by historians George Hutchinson and Michael Denning tend to overemphasise the extent of interracial co-operation in this period.⁵⁴

Cultural historians had seen relationships across race lines in the 1920s and 1930s as a well-worn pattern of whites exploiting blacks, however in the 1990s, Hutchinson, Denning and others revisited these assumptions. They examined the influences and interests which black and white artists and intellectuals of the period shared. They demonstrated the influence of the pragmatic philosophy of William James and Robert Park; the cultural pluralism of, among others, Alain Locke; and the anthropological studies of Franz Boas. Hutchinson and Alan Wald note that intellectuals of both races operated within the same “force fields” - read the same journals and magazines like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *New Masses*, in which they published their own work and reviewed each other’s efforts.⁵⁵ They were drawn to cultural nationalism and cultural pluralism and considered what shape American culture could take in the twentieth century. There was a meeting of minds across the fields of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, social work and reform, and literary and cultural theory.

Hutchinson describes the New Negro Renaissance as:

in part an attempt to augment the value of black culture within the cultural field – to accrue what Bourdieu terms ‘cultural capital’ as *one* aspect of the struggle for social power and justice.⁵⁶

This was an important correction to Huggins’ and Lewis’s oversimplification of the views of Alain Locke and others. Hutchinson argues that without this striving for cultural power (criticized for its bourgeois nature), the advances of the 1930s and later decades would not have been made.

⁵⁴ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*; Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

⁵⁵ Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time : The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), xiv.

⁵⁶ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 4.

Where earlier literary historians suspected exploitation, Hutchinson sees instead a “meeting of black and white intellectuals on the grounds of American cultural nationalism” as a positive and enduring development.⁵⁷ He delves into the interwoven relationships, publications, associations, and groups of the era to map out a cultural field that hosted a great variety of intellectual thought with ideas cross-pollinating from individual to individual and group to group. He forcefully denounces the historiographical accounts of leading African American literary historians (including Harold Cruse, Nathan Huggins, David Levering Lewis, Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker) for their polarization of black and white interests within the debates. According to Hutchinson, key arguments within the literature were circular, with the “rhetorical use of whiteness as a sort of trump card played from almost every conceivable position in the critical game.” Therefore the Harlem Renaissance failed because it was pushed in the direction of the ‘primitive’ by whites, or because its primary motivation was in minimising cultural differences between black and white literary use of language, form and values and thus gaining white acceptance (as in negative judgements of the work of Jessie Fauset or Nella Larsen). Other historians (notably Lewis) painted a picture of canny blacks taking advantage of neurotic whites to promote a radical movement by sleuth. Hutchinson argues that prior historians had discounted evidence that proved that the success of the Harlem Renaissance owed much to its interracial diversity.⁵⁸

My examination of Brown’s interactions with white scholars exposes greater interracial tensions and conflict than are suggested by broad surveys of the period. This thesis also demonstrates that the historiography of the New Negro Renaissance is too simplistic to capture the cross-disciplinary efforts of Brown and his contemporaries to effect change in race relations. That there was a great deal of interracial co-operation and shared ideas cannot be

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 15-16. See also William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left : African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6. Maxwell argues that African American writers linked to the CPUSA in the 1930s had generally been involved in a black/white left-wing political alliance since the 1920s and were not lured to the left by predatory white communists in the 1930s as suggested by Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967). Cruse had railed again black intellectuals for allowing their cultural expression to be “smother[ed] and choke[d] by the CPUSA.”

contested, but this should not obscure the extent to which black intellectuals were excluded from full participation and recompense. Predictably, Brown's efforts at revising the interpretation of African Americans within literature, social science writings and mainstream American culture brought him into conflict with conservatives, particularly in the South, but they also brought tensions to his relationships with white intellectuals who considered themselves to be racial liberals.

Brown's projects in these years expose a tangled cross-racial debate on whose opinion would dominate in the representation of black character and identity, whether in literature, the press or in social science publications. Despite the advantages brought about by a quality education and a higher class status, black intellectuals operated under similar constraints as the black masses they studied. They had limited access to funding for their studies and few career opportunities. They were considered deeply subjective and partial in their studies of black communities and race relations, in an era where white objectivity was rarely called into question. They operated under a great strain. To achieve recognition in the social sciences required impartiality and objectivity, and yet their upbringing and inclination pushed them to act, and as activists to use their intellectual powers to subvert white supremacy.

Sources and Methodology

This study is an intellectual biography of Sterling A. Brown during his most prolific period. It concentrates on a specific dimension of Brown's career: his transition from creative writing to the social sciences. Consideration is given to the context in which Brown worked and his participation in alliances (with black contemporaries and across the colour line). Rather than take a psychological approach to Brown's character or personality, I focus on the events in his career in these years that illuminate the problems outlined above, namely his efforts to change the image of black Americans in the dominant culture, to build knowledge about black Americans that included a

black perspective, and ultimately to bring about change in the status of African Americans within the society.

Biography has been criticised as an inferior approach to history, which lacks the capacity to convey an analytically sophisticated interpretation of the past.⁵⁹ However, as Lois Banner notes:

A life deeply lived, like any complex historical narrative, moves across space, time, and areas of human involvement both capriciously and predictably, validating certain accepted historical conventions while challenging others.⁶⁰

Hence, my approach within this study has been to use Brown's experiences as a portal into the world of black and white intellectuals in the period as they tussled over the representation of African Americans. A close examination of Brown's participation in specific projects and debates enables consideration of the assumptions and contradictions in other historians' accounts of his role and the surrounding context.

The thesis uses primary sources such as Brown's personal papers and those of his allies in the period to a greater extent than other studies of his work, which have focused in the main on textual analysis of his poetry. Brown's poetry, his literary criticism and other writings have been cited within the thesis to understand his views and demonstrate his objectives in relation to the representation of African American culture. However, there is no intention to critique form or style.

Brown's personal papers are housed at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre at Howard University.⁶¹ He was often chastised by colleagues and friends for his failure to respond to their letters. However, because his communication style was frank and less guarded than that of some of his contemporaries, his correspondence is illuminating. Some of Brown's closest intellectual allies taught alongside him at Howard University in the early 1930s, and there is therefore virtually no personal communication between

⁵⁹ D. Nasaw, "AHR Roundtable Historians and Biography," *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009): 573-74.

⁶⁰ L. W. Banner, "AHR Roundtable Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009): 582.

⁶¹ Note that Brown's unpublished creative writing was closed to researchers at the time of writing.

them in the archives. A selection of Brown's letters to and from Charles S. Johnson at Fisk University survive in the MSRC and provide a vivid picture of the relationship between the two men. Federal Writers' Project files were consulted both at the Library of Congress and at Howard, where Brown kept copies of more 'sensitive' correspondence relating to the Project.

The papers of Jonathan Daniels at the University of North Carolina and Lillian Smith at the University of Florida were also important sources in terms of understanding the attitudes of southern liberals in the period (although unfortunately part of Lillian Smith's archive was lost after a fire at her home in 1955). It was a disappointment to find no correspondence between Benjamin A. Botkin and Brown in Botkin's papers and very little between Brown and Melville Herskovits in Herskovits' papers at Northwestern University. A complete list of the archives consulted is available in the bibliography.

Terminology

Within the thesis, the terms 'African American' and 'black American' have been used interchangeably as the terms preferred by people of African descent in the United States in recent years.⁶² The term 'Negro' (capitalised) was the term most respectfully used by black and white intellectuals from the 1930s until the 1950s. Sterling Brown and many of his contemporaries used the term with pride in these years, and often resisted the change in terminology that came about with the Black Power Movement of the 1960s.⁶³ It is used within the thesis when describing writings of the period or in direct quotations.⁶⁴

⁶² See "NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey 2011," NBC News/ Wall Street Journal, <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/wsjnbcpoll-01192011.pdf>. 42% preferred Black, 35% African American.

⁶³ Charles H. Rowell and Sterling A. Brown, "'Let Me Be Wid Ole Jazzbo': An Interview with Sterling A. Brown," *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998): 800.

⁶⁴ For a description of the debates in relation to designation since the 1930s, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Naming Ourselves: The Politics and Meaning of Self-Designation," in *The Columbia Guide to African American History since 1939*, ed. Robert L. Harris and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 91-100.

Chapter outline

In chapter one I examine Brown's development as a 'New Negro' intellectual, including the values instilled in Brown through his family, his membership of Washington D.C.'s black elite, his formal education, his experiences in the South in the 1920s and the intellectual alliances he formed in the early 1930s. I argue that he and his African American contemporaries in the social sciences developed a shared understanding of what they could do to accelerate improvements in the status of African Americans and that their shared objectives motivated him to move away from creative writing and into projects more closely allied to their world. This sets the context for chapters two to five. These are broadly chronological spanning the early 1930s to the Second World War and, within that framework, each chapter is concerned with a particular theme.

In chapter two, I explore Brown's relationship with folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin and argue that they built a productive alliance across racial lines and they were innovators in the field of folklore studies. Botkin and Brown sought to initiate a democratic debate about the meaning and significance of race, identity and culture within 1930s America. They had shared ideas on methodology and the importance of moving away from written text to the everyday talk of people in contemporary situations. They saw folklore as a living and evolving art form that could be adapted and used creatively. In Botkin, Brown found a genuine ally across the colour line. However, I set out the tensions that arose from their ideas about the meaning and uses of folklore, activism, creativity and accessibility and how these tensions brought them into opposition with white academic folklorists eager to establish professional credibility.

Chapter three traces Brown's contribution to the Federal Writers' Project between 1936 and 1939. As part of a racially integrated national team, Brown sought to bring a new understanding of diversity within American culture and history to a wide readership. He saw the Federal Writers' Project as a

powerful means to change attitudes in American society towards African American history, culture and civil rights. I examine Brown's relationships with powerful individuals associated with the Federal Writers' Project, black and white, liberal and conservative. I uncover his efforts to counter a romanticised version of southern life through a fair representation of southern blacks in the American Guides, by influencing the way that ex-slaves' narratives were collected, and through his editorial input on the ground breaking study, *The Negro in Virginia*. I examine Brown's persistent opposition to the Georgia Writers' Project publication *Drums and Shadows* to understand why liberal depictions of southern black culture were sometimes as problematic to Brown and his contemporaries as their battles with racial conservatives.

Brown's contribution to the Carnegie Study of the Negro in America is investigated in chapter four. The study resulted in *An American Dilemma*, a book that influenced social policy with regards to race for subsequent decades. Brown was commissioned by the Study's Director Gunnar Myrdal to research and write about 'the Negro in American Culture,' an aspect of the study that was later pilloried by historians and critics. I argue that Myrdal's ideas about the pathology of black culture were not in fact 'blaming the victim' as later critics would assert. I also argue that Myrdal was keen to incorporate an analysis of African American culture within the book and that the study would have been far more nuanced had Brown made a significant impact on its content. I explore why Brown's influence on the Study was negligible.

Chapter five deals with Brown's attempts at reportage in the South in the early 1940s. Commissioned to write a black American response to southern white liberal journalist Jonathan Daniels' *A Southerner Discovers the South*, Brown's book was not published in his lifetime. I analyse Daniels' book and consider why black critics were so generous in their contemporaneous reviews about a book that seemed to cleave to the southern past and avoid any progressive commentary on race relations. I compare Brown's travels and his writing to Daniels' and through a close analysis of both books and a consideration of the context of their journeys, I expose the challenges for

black and white intellectuals in coming to any sort of productive alliance about the future of the South in these years.

Conclusion

Brown's disappearance from the literary canon of the twentieth century can be explained by a range of factors that also eclipsed his literary contemporaries, albeit to a lesser degree. But his projects in the 1930s and early 1940s demonstrate that his disappearance also related to his attempt to infiltrate the more rigid world of the social sciences. He attempted to bring his notions of black history and cultural resilience into this world. His struggles to be heard in this arena inform our understanding of the long civil rights movement and about the compromises that black social scientists had to make in the middle of the twentieth century. His contribution to the American canon was 'rediscovered' in the field of literature but his efforts in the field of social science have not been examined to the same degree. His efforts were not analysed systematically by those 'recovering' him who romanticised his relationship to the rural South of the 1930s and 1940s, whilst ignoring his efforts to participate in a different dialogue about modernisation, cultural pluralism and objectivity. This thesis addresses the gaps and silences in the historiography about Sterling Brown and in the process, contributes to a deeper understanding of what black writers and social scientists sought to achieve in these years and the constraints they had to overcome.

Chapter 1: The Making of a 'New Negro'

Introduction

In 1955, Sterling Brown refuted the notion that the New Negro Renaissance was confined to Harlem and to the Roaring Twenties. He asserted that the

New Negro movement had temporal roots in the past and spatial roots elsewhere in America, and the term has validity, it seems to me, only when considered to be a continuing tradition.¹

By then, Brown had produced *The Negro Caravan* anthology, which comprehensively outlined the black cultural tradition expressed through folklore, poetry, short stories and novels, drama, and autobiography.² However, the continuing tradition to which he referred did not relate merely to the body of literature produced by black Americans. It also alluded to a tradition of pride, resilience and resistance to white supremacy that he and his 'New Negro' colleagues shared. They were building on a black intellectual activist tradition established by the preceding generation of race leaders such as Kelly Miller of Howard University, Carter G. Woodson at the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and W. E. B. Du Bois at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The path of these elder race leaders led from a stance of removed intellectual and moral leadership to pragmatic political activism.³ Brown and his allies developed within that tradition whilst they also bridled against its adherence to religion and morality and sought a secular approach to accelerate improvements in the status of black Americans.

This chapter provides biographical information to situate Sterling Brown within the context of formative influences upon his life and work and the part he would play in the 'continuing tradition'. I establish the lasting impact that

¹ Sterling A. Brown, "The New Negro in Literature," in *A Son's Return : Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Sterling A. Brown and Mark A. Sanders (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 185.

² Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, *The Negro Caravan : Writings by American Negroes* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 421.

³ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 19-31.

Brown's father, an archetypal 'Negro Uplifter,' would have on his son's thoughts and actions. I examine Brown's education, formal and informal, and dismantle some of the myths that arose about the years he spent in the South from 1923 to 1929. I also examine the alliances he developed with other black intellectuals of about the same age: Ralph Bunche, Allison Davis, Abram Harris; and Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier who were a few years older. These men were rising stars in the social sciences during the 1930s. At this time, Bunche, Harris and Frazier taught at Howard University. Charles S. Johnson and Allison Davis spent the 1930s in the South; Johnson was Head of Sociology at Fisk and Davis carried out research in Mississippi and Louisiana.⁴ I contend that Brown and these contemporaries developed a shared set of goals that have not been explored thoroughly by other historians, especially in relation to how they affected Brown's choice to move away from creative writing and into areas of work that were more closely aligned to the social sciences. Examining their objectives also sets the scene for some of the debates that emerge in later chapters about the interpretation of black life and culture by black and white scholars.

In reading articles and essays written by Sterling Brown and his contemporaries from the 1920s to the Second World War, one could almost forget that they were personally adversely affected by segregation, as it limited their access to education, to employment and to funding. We have only occasional glimpses of their exclusion from white America and the alternative black world they created out of necessity as well as choice.⁵ The day-to-day impact for them of living in a partitioned society was seldom articulated. Brown and his allies in the 1930s – Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, Allison Davis, Abram Harris, Charles S. Johnson – rarely left personal diaries or autobiographies and, unlike black intellectuals from the 1960s onward, they generally avoided a personal or confessional style.⁶ This

⁴ Some reference is also made to Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes who were similar in approach to Brown in their creative writing.

⁵ See, for example, Ralph Bunche's speech to a black Los Angeles audience regarding the establishment of a "Colored Only" swimming pool in Los Angeles, in Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche: An American Life*, 40. E. Franklin Frazier, "All God's Chillun Got Eyes," *The Crisis* 29, 6 (1925): 254-55.

⁶ Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were the main exceptions to this, as both produced autobiographies. See Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York; London: A.A. Knopf, 1940); Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road an Autobiography* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1942).

chapter draws attention to the impact of segregation and discrimination on their working lives and foregrounds tensions that will reappear in subsequent chapters of the thesis when I examine the projects Brown undertook with white scholars during the 1930s.

Work as the ‘Core of the Moral Life’

Sterling Brown’s father, Sterling Nelson Brown, was born a slave in Roane County, East Tennessee in November 1858.⁷ He appears to have been the perfect archetype of the uplift ideology that historians have described as originating in the 1890s and sustained through the early decades of the twentieth century.⁸ He emphasised strong moral values, the importance of family, of service to the community, and of duty to the race. Educating oneself and one’s children was of paramount importance so that service to God and one’s people could be carried out to the best of one’s abilities.⁹

In his autobiography, Sterling Nelson Brown emphasised the Protestant work ethic and determination to succeed that were common in American thought for generations, that “work was the core of the moral life.”¹⁰ After Emancipation, his own father Handy worked as a tenant farmer and a blacksmith but by 1870, he was seventy years old and in poor health. Sixteen-year old Sterling Nelson Brown was called upon to support his two younger brothers and his mother.¹¹ He had worked from an even younger age; he was a houseboy for a year when he was ten; he even tried his hand at clearing the railroad tracks for the Cincinnati Southern Railroad, but at the age of thirteen he did not have the brute strength needed for that back-breaking work and he only lasted a day on the job. For three years until he was sixteen, he worked in a brickyard and earned enough money to buy his

⁷ Year 1870; Census Place: District 13, Roane County, Tennessee; Roll: M593_1555; Page: 480; Image: 336, U. S. Bureau of the Census.

⁸ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁹ Sterling N. Brown, *My Own Life Story*, Electronic Edition ed. (University of North Carolina, 2001).

¹⁰ Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

¹¹ Year 1870; Census Place: District 13, Roane County, Tennessee; Roll: M593_1555; Page: 480; Image: 336.

parents a small farm.¹² His self portrait was like the character of Big Boy in his son's poem, "Odyssey of Big Boy," who had driven steel, stripped tobacco, mined coal, cut cane and held numerous other jobs.¹³ Crucially, Sterling Nelson Brown made a decision that his achievements and that of his father should not be forgotten by capturing them in his autobiography *My Own Life Story*, published in 1924. His son would cherish these images of his father, the 'Strong Man' and in a brief aside about his family written many years later on a visit to Roane County, Sterling Allen Brown "grew proud, visualizing my father doing a man-sized job even as a boy."¹⁴

Like many of the first generation after Emancipation, Sterling Nelson Brown was determined to achieve an education for himself and his family. He undertook an arduous seventy-five mile walk from Roane County to pick up the train to Nashville so that he could enrol at Fisk University.¹⁵ Established in January 1866 to educate newly freed slaves, Fisk began as an elementary school but soon expanded to become a 'normal' school which prepared its students to become teachers. Sterling Nelson Brown spent ten years at Fisk, studying hard; teaching to make ends meet, preaching at various local churches and graduated with a BA in 1895.

Sterling's mother Adelaide Allen did not write an autobiography and we have access to only fragments of information about her. She was born in Gallatin, just north east of Nashville, in April 1861, shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War but was taken to Nashville as a baby by her aunt Mercy.¹⁶ Education was also highly valued by Adelaide and her family; her aunt Mercy was a seamstress and supported Adelaide financially to attend Fisk from grade school to college,¹⁷ where she excelled. She married Sterling Nelson Brown and they moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where Brown became pastor of the Mount Zion Congregational Church and graduated BD from Oberlin Theological Seminary. Their first daughters, Georgia (1885) and Grace

¹² Brown, *My Own Life Story*, 10.

¹³ Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 20-21.

¹⁴ Brown, Tidwell, and Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South*, 193.

¹⁵ Brown, *My Own Life Story*.

¹⁶ Brown, Tidwell, and Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South*, 192.

¹⁷ Year: 1870; Census Place: Nashville Ward 4, Davidson, Tennessee; Roll: M593_1523; Page: 273; Image: 191., U. S. Bureau of the Census.

(1888), were born in Ohio, following which the family moved to Washington D.C. where they had three further daughters, Mary, Elsie, and Helen, and a son, Sterling Allen Brown.¹⁸ Adelaide Allen Brown was well read, with an aptitude for performing poetry that she passed on to her son.¹⁹ All of the Brown children would be university trained and go on to be teachers.

The parents and carers of Brown's later friends and colleagues also recognised the worth of education.²⁰ E. Franklin Frazier's father taught himself reading and writing and "had an almost religious faith in the importance of education."²¹ Ralph Bunche was brought up mainly by his maternal grandmother who had little schooling but "appreciated the value of education and insisted that I should get as much of it as possible, and the best possible."²² Charles S. Johnson described the "quality and security" of his father's education, which was his "most notable difference from the typical Negro minister in southwest Virginia" at the end of the nineteenth century.²³ Abram Harris's father, a butcher, "filled their Richmond home with books" and provided his son with the best education he could afford at Virginia Union University.²⁴

Religion and service to the community and the race were at the heart of the Brown family ethos. By the time Sterling Allen Brown was born on 1st May 1901 in a house on the Howard University Campus in Washington D.C., his father was the Pastor at Lincoln Memorial, a Professor of Theology at Howard University, and a member of the District of Columbia's Board of Education.²⁵ Reverend Brown hosted conferences on the race question and provided many services to the black community through the Church,

¹⁸ Year 1900, Washington, District of Columbia. Roll: T623_158, Page 10b, Enumeration District: 16, U. S. Bureau of the Census.

¹⁹ Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 19.

²⁰ Langston Hughes' father was the exception. It was not until Hughes had his work published in a range of journals that his father begrudgingly agreed to fund a year at Columbia University in 1925. Hughes later studied for the BA at Lincoln in Pennsylvania, funded through the patronage of Amy Spingarn. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes. Vol. 1* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 122.

²¹ Arthur P. Davis, "E. Franklin Frazier (1894-1962): A Profile," *The Journal of Negro Education* 31, 4 (1962): 430.

²² Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 31.

²³ Charles S. Johnson, "Charles S. Johnson," in *American Spiritual Autobiographies, Fifteen Self-Portraits*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Harper, 1948), 191.

²⁴ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 86.

²⁵ Booker T. Washington and Louis R. Harlan, *The Booker T. Washington Papers. Vol. 10, Vol. 10* (Urbana: Univ. of Ill. P., 1981), 251.

including education and training, youth clubs, an employment exchange, a Penny Savings Bank, and a settlement centre for migrants new to the city.²⁶

In his later years, Sterling Allen Brown said little about growing up as the son of a devout and active clergyman in a busy community church. He and the friends and colleagues he would grow close to in the 1920s and 1930s avoided the religious and moral overtones of their fathers' generations.²⁷ As Steven Mintz has noted, the black churches and benevolent societies fortified to a certain extent barriers between the black middle-class and the poor but at the same time they helped to embed connections between the classes and to instil shared values of "racial co-operation, mutual self-help, charity and communal responsibility."²⁸ Brown's upbringing within an active and civic-minded church had an influence. The insight Brown brought to his observations of struggling people in his poetry, his awareness of the fortitude of the poor and uneducated in the face of tribulation, his understanding of inequality and oppression and his ability to engage with people from all walks of life were nurtured through the attitudes of his parents and the activism centred in his father's church.

As well as education and duty to the race, Sterling Nelson Brown articulated an immense pride of his family history under slavery, and he emphasised not only his father Handy's skills but also his resistance to the brutalities and degradations of the chattel system. Handy had been a skilled craftsman during slavery: "a carpenter, blacksmith, wheelwright, and general utility man." Like the folk heroes his son would later examine in poetry and prose – Casey Jones, Big Boy, Stagolee, and John Henry – Handy resisted cruel and unfair treatment: "he was manly to the core and would fight like a tiger when attacked.... whipping every overseer who tried his hand on him."²⁹

²⁶ Brown, *My Own Life Story*, 16-17.

²⁷ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 14.

²⁸ Steven Mintz, "A Historical Ethnography of Black Washington, D. C.," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 52 (1989): 235-53, 41.

²⁹ Brown, *My Own Life Story*, 7.

Race Leadership – Making ‘the Best Possible Man’

Reverend Brown was closely acquainted with the race leaders of his generation, including Carter G. Woodson who established *The Journal of Negro History* and inaugurated Black History Week, and Kelly Miller, sociologist and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University. He knew personally the most influential race spokesmen of his generation, W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, who spoke from the pulpit at Lincoln Memorial.³⁰ Like Kelly Miller, Reverend Brown supported both Du Bois and Washington to varying degrees over time.³¹

In 1903, Reverend Brown organised a ‘Conference of Negro Leaders on the Race Problem’ at Lincoln Temple, in which Booker T. Washington participated. Press coverage suggested that Washington did not particularly favour the breadth of discussion, noting that he did not take part in discussions about any contentious topic such as rape or lynching. Washington urged the conference to focus not only on condemning wrongs done to Negroes and advocating Negro rights, but also to promote “something that is constructive.” There is no doubt that he was warning the conference away from criticisms of southern racial policy and practice. It appears that Booker T. Washington’s view was not in the majority among the churchmen present who considered during the sessions the more controversial issues of “the city Negro, rape and lynching, the Negro as an industrial factor, and the Negro as a patriot.”³²

In the same year, W. E. B. Du Bois, who had been a contemporary of Brown’s parents at Fisk and would be a lifelong influence on their son, published *The Souls of Black Folk*, which denounced Booker T. Washington’s conciliatory approach towards whites, his promotion of vocational rather than academic opportunities for black Americans, his tendency to blame members of the race for their lack of advancement, and to put full responsibility for their

³⁰ James G. Spady, "Sterling Brown's Voyage from Froggy Bottom to the *Negro Caravan*, 1901-1941," in *Sterling A. Brown: A UMUM Tribute*, ed. Black History Museum Committee (1982), 165.

³¹ August Meier, "The Racial and Educational Philosophy of Kelly Miller, 1895-1915," *The Journal of Negro Education* 29, 2 (1960): 121-27.

³² "Negro Leader Talks," *Washington Post*, 11 Nov 1903.

progression in American society on themselves alone, ignoring discrimination. Du Bois called instead for political and civil rights and access to higher education and for an open and frank discussion of the racial situation.³³

Like Du Bois, Reverend Brown spoke out against injustice. He declared that after “two and a half centuries of unrequited toil in building up and beautifying this garden spot of the earth ... the Negro should be let alone to work out his own destiny,” and condemned the extent to which they had been “heartlessly cheated, defrauded and killed” since Emancipation. When southern journalist John Temple Graves lobbied for the removal of American Negroes into a separate territory, he wrote to *The Washington Post* in strong protest.³⁴ When in 1898, a postmaster and members of his family were lynched in Lake City, South Carolina by a 100-strong mob of white men expressing their fury at the federal appointment of a black man, Reverend Brown criticised the Church for its hypocrisy in failing to take a stand against racial terrorism:

any system of religion that goes frantic over sin at a distance and palliates it at home, cannot commend itself as the all-conquering religion of the Son of Man.³⁵

The following year, he spoke out in the pulpit to condemn lynchings in Georgia, and to urge black voters to “openly declare allegiance to the men of any and all parties who will show themselves friendly” rather than to automatically vote Republican.³⁶

Historian Kevin Gaines distinguishes between different types of uplift ideology. The first relates to overcoming personal or group oppression, mainly through spirituality and education. This ideology was prevalent after Emancipation and was predicated on the notion that blacks were citizens deserving of the same rights and responsibilities as white Americans. The second type involved the black elite ‘uplifting’ the black masses by promoting

³³ John Hope Franklin et al., *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 251.

³⁴ Sterling N. Brown, "The Negro State," *Washington Post*, 30 Jul 1893.

³⁵ "Wrongs of the Negro Race I," *Washington Post*, Feb 1898.

³⁶ "Not Black Man's Problem," *Washington Post*, May 1899.

a rigid moral framework that governed behaviour. The masses could be uplifted through sobriety, respectability, and careful management by the male head of household of home, money, sexuality, social behaviour, and community service. The problem at the heart of this ideology was that it suggested that rather than possessing a natural right to citizenship and fair treatment, the black masses must demonstrate (to the black elite and to white Americans) that they were deserving of the status.

This second strain of uplift ignored the economic, legal and political conditions that constrained the opportunities afforded to black Americans in a deeply racist society, where structural conditions were established to the advantage of whites and maintained through law, custom and practice and violence, particularly but not exclusively in the South. Hence Gaines sees the presence of an “unconscious internalized racism” within the black middle class of this generation. No matter what the extent of their own success, they were still disadvantaged by the notion of the race as inferior. This manifested itself in a “psychic residue of self-doubt and shame” which made them treat lower-class blacks with contempt. Racial uplift created class stratification within black society that diminished an earlier ideology, which emphasised public education, employment rights and the group struggle for democracy.³⁷

Reverend Sterling N. Brown did promote Victorian values of respectability, for example, criticising

those of our race who board our street cars at late hours and stampede the place, who talk loud and act boisterously demanding rights, add no personal dignity to themselves or the scene and no friends to our cause.³⁸

Overall, however, his published writings demonstrate a confidence in the race rather than ‘self-doubt or shame.’ His pride in his father Handy’s achievements as a slave and a free man, and his later public criticisms of the state, the church and politicians when they refused to intervene against racial oppression demonstrate his belief in blacks’ inherent rights as citizens, a

³⁷ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 1-17, 6, 2.

³⁸ Sterling N. Brown, "The Negro Vs the Negro," *Washington Post*, 28 Nov 1902.

conviction that he passed on to his son. Although his son would follow a secular path, he would also be part of that continuing tradition which included a duty to family, community and the race. As his father put it:

The time has fully come for the good people of America to get right on the question of racial co-operation The Negroes of America are not anxious to make the greatest possible black man, as such, but rather the best possible man; and when such a man is made he wants every opportunity which a man deserves for life, liberty and the pursuits of happiness.³⁹

In summary, Brown's father instilled within him pride in his racial heritage, certainty in relation to black Americans' rights to equal citizenship, and the confidence to speak out against racial violence and oppression. He impressed upon his son the need to be of service to family, community and race. Brown would need the confidence and courage passed on to him by his father as he matured into adulthood in a deeply divided society.

Growing up with Jim Crow

As Brown grew up in Washington D.C. in the early twentieth century, it was home to a solid middle class of black ministers, teachers, lawyers and businessmen, but upper class and poor blacks lived side by side. Mansion houses hid squalid alleyways and tenements.⁴⁰ Unemployment was high. After the First World War, the pace and scale of black migration to America's cities increased and the colour map of Washington D.C. shifted with black residents replacing white as new migrants arrived from the South.⁴¹ The Jim Crow practices of the South became the norm in D.C. For example, employment opportunities for black Americans were increasingly restricted and government offices were segregated.⁴² Sterling Brown's high school friend Allison Davis's father was demoted from head of division at the

³⁹ *My Own Life Story*, 47.

⁴⁰ James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington : Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 1-56.

⁴¹ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora : How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 97-98.

⁴² Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City; a History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), 159-67.

Government Printing Office to a messenger during President Woodrow Wilson's administration.⁴³ Until Sterling Brown went to college, he had "never spoken to a white boy except the little son of the drugstore man where we used to go to get sundaes..."⁴⁴

Segregation had solidified in the South at this stage to the extent that it seemed timeless.⁴⁵ However, Charles S. Johnson, who was eight years older than Brown, remembered the changes coming into force in Bristol, Virginia, where he was brought up. The clerk at the drug store where he and his mother stopped for an ice cream soda every Saturday now called the owner to explain "that something had happened, it seemed, and that he could not serve us any more at the counter;" the trolley car conductor told us "to go to one corner and not take just any vacant seat."⁴⁶ Ralph Bunche (born 1904) recalled his family's resistance to Jim Crow. In Tennessee and New Mexico, his mother refused to move back to the 'colored' passengers' section of a train or to the 'colored' section of a cinema. Far from the South, in Los Angeles, the landlord of the bungalow they wished to rent initially mistook Ralph's brother Tom for a white man. On realising his mistake, he changed the locks to the property to prevent their gaining access, but Ralph's brother and grandmother forced the door and stayed for the full period of the tenancy.⁴⁷

As young adults, Brown and his contemporaries witnessed racial tensions turn to violence. Washington D.C. experienced vicious race riots in the aftermath of the Great Migration and the First World War. Black servicemen returned from the fight for democracy overseas, and bridled against segregation. In July 1919, a race riot broke out in the city after a black man was questioned in relation to a sexual assault on the white wife of a Navy

⁴³ Dallas L. Browne, "Across Class and Culture: Allison Davis and His Works," in *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology*, ed. Ira E. Harrison (Urbana [u.a.]: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999), 170.

⁴⁴ Sterling A. Brown, "A Son's Return: 'Oh, Didn't He Ramble'," in *A Son's Return : Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Sterling A. Brown and Mark A. Sanders (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 7. Ralph Bunche, who had experienced very little racial discrimination during his education at UCLA (then the University of California) and Harvard, recalled in the 1970s that he had found the segregated life required in Washington D.C. in the 1930s to be an affront to human dignity, it was "like serving out a sentence." Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 45.

⁴⁵ It was actually a development of the 1890s as demonstrated by C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1955).

⁴⁶ Johnson, "Charles S. Johnson," 195.

⁴⁷ Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 34-35.

man. Unrest lasted for four days and spread across the capitol city. Seven people were killed in the fighting and approximately 90 were hospitalised.⁴⁸ Reverend Brown's friend, Carter G. Woodson was caught up in the riots. Whilst walking home on Sunday 20 July, Woodson was forced to hide in a shop front on Pennsylvania Avenue, while a white mob murdered a man in front of his eyes:

They had caught a Negro and deliberately held him as one would a beef for slaughter, and when they had conveniently adjusted him for lynching, they shot him. I heard him groaning in his struggle as I hurried away as fast as I could without running, expecting every moment to be lynched myself.⁴⁹

One can imagine the young Brown being warned to take care as the family read an article by another of their father's friends, James Weldon Johnson, in *The Washington Post* warning "Colored Men Will Hereafter Protect Themselves."⁵⁰

Riots also broke out in Chicago, Omaha, Knoxville and Charleston. Charles S. Johnson was studying sociology at the University of Chicago and was Head of Research and Investigation at the Chicago Urban League. He was caught up in the unrest between his Urban League office and his lodgings near the University of Chicago. A dispute between black and white swimmers at Lake Michigan led to the deaths of twenty-three blacks and fifteen whites. Johnson never spoke publicly about his brush with the riots but told his friend Edwin Embree years later that he had been at risk from gunshots as he dragged injured victims to safety.⁵¹

At eighteen, Brown secured a scholarship from M Street School to study English Literature at Williams College. Previously enrolled at an all-black high school, he was now one of a tiny handful of black students at a white liberal arts college in Massachusetts. The college administration assigned Brown and another black student Carter Marshall to a room with a Jewish

⁴⁸ Jan Voogd, *Race Riots & Resistance : The Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 85-89.

⁴⁹ "Race Riots of 1919 Gave Glimpses of Future Struggles," *Washington Post*, 1 Mar 1999.

⁵⁰ "Riots Elsewhere Forecast by Negro - 'Coloured Men Will Hereafter Protect Themselves' Says J. W. Johnson," *Washington Post*, 25 Jul 1919.

⁵¹ Edwin R. Embree, *13 Against the Odds* (New York: Viking Press, 1944), 56-57. See also Gilpin and Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson : Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, 12-13.

student in their first year and the following year they were assigned lodgings away from campus with a local widow. They were educated alongside the white majority in the student body but there was an unspoken expectation in terms of social separation and they mixed primarily with the other black students. Brown later described their treatment by the administration as “benign neglect” rather than outright hostility.⁵²

At least one teacher, George Dutton, was very important to Brown. He introduced him to a wide range of literature including critical realism. Brown recalled years later that in a class that Dutton had taught on the Polish novelist Joseph Conrad, he pointed out that when Conrad was feted in London, he ignored the fawning flattery, probably because he was “thinking about his native Poland and the plight of his people.” Brown believed that Dutton was encouraging him not to be distracted by the privilege of attending Williams, not to be “fooled by any lionizing,” but was telling him that he had responsibilities to black Americans: “There is business out there that you have to take care of. Your people, too, are in a plight.”⁵³

A further scholarship enabled Brown to attend Harvard where he achieved his AB in English in 1923. Brown began to explore the way stereotypes were created and perpetuated within the dominant literary culture:

I was always conscious of what was happening to our characters in American literature, but never in a scholarly way until I saw what they did with the Irish. Then I saw what they were doing to the Jews. And then the (whole damn cause) Well, I was a stereotype, and I became an expert on stereotypes.⁵⁴

This exposure of the uses of stereotypes for a political purpose, that is to support the perpetuation of an unequal and exploitative economic, political and social structure, would become central to Brown’s career.

As children and young adults, Brown and his contemporaries felt the increasing encroachment of racial segregation and it seemed that every

⁵² Brown, “A Son’s Return: ‘Oh, Didn’t He Ramble,’” 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁴ John Edgar Tidwell, Sterling A. Brown, and John S. Wright, “‘Steady and Unaccusing’: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown,” *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998): 815.

family had some personal experience of unfair treatment or violence. Although Brown experienced social segregation at college, his education also widened his perspective and he saw that the use of literature as a tool to keep certain racial or ethnic groups to a lower status was not confined to African Americans. The next phase of Brown's education was to be in the South, where he would immerse himself in southern black life and attack stereotypes of black Americans through his poetry and prose.

The South and the 'Opening for Larger Service'

Brown took up a position as an English teacher at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg in 1923. It was the beginning of a six-year sojourn in the South, during which Brown would mature as an astute observer of black life, an acerbic critic of segregation and inequality, and a skilful poet. Most of the black intellectuals with whom he would form a strong intellectual bond with in the 1930s also spent significant periods of time in the South in this decade and it would continue to draw their attention as scholars and activists over subsequent years. However, for black scholars committing to the South meant adjusting to the strain of living under Jim Crow in its most institutionalised forms. It also often meant working in financially stretched black colleges with far less resources for teaching and research than a scholar could expect in a white university.⁵⁵

In later life, Brown recounted a story about his father and Carter G. Woodson setting him off on the road south, on an odyssey during which he would be educated about life and the African American experience. It was a version of Brown's maturation that would be heard and amplified by intellectuals attempting to raise his profile in the 1990s. They romanticised his journey south in the 1920s as a quest, initiated with a clear mission in mind, to soak up every aspect of black southern folk life, "to learn something about his people" and thereby enable him to throw off the "confining Black middleclass

⁵⁵ Jonathan Scott Holloway and Ben Keppel, "Introduction," in *Black Scholars on the Line : Race, Social Science, and American Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jonathan Scott Holloway and Ben Keppel (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 7.

ethos of Washington DC, and of a New England Ivy League sensibility.”⁵⁶ This telling of Brown’s story implies that he was a member of the privileged black middle-classes, disconnected from his own culture and from his racial roots, who was then “made good” by his personal odyssey down south.

Writing in 1923 about his son’s first job in the Virginia Theological Seminary and College in Lynchburg, Reverend Brown had a different perspective. He was pleased that his son

had the courage to select a position where not only the opportunity for teaching college subjects in keeping with his training, but, where the opening for larger service seemed to him superior to that proffered in the High Schools of Washington.⁵⁷

Reverend Brown did not describe his son’s employment in Virginia as a quest to “learn something of his people.” Instead, there is an allusion to moral responsibility and perhaps a hint of wistfulness in his description of his son’s new job; he may have hoped that his son would eventually follow in his footsteps into the ministry.

In fact, job opportunities were severely limited for young black graduates like Brown. Racism meant that teaching posts at northern universities were denied them, and they were often obliged to relocate to southern black colleges to teach. Allison Davis, for example, achieved an MA at Harvard having graduated with the highest distinction from Williams College in 1924, but was denied a junior faculty post at Williams the following year.⁵⁸ Instead, he took up a position at the conservative Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he was based from 1926 to 1930. The emphasis was on vocational training and Davis protested alongside students in 1927 in order to lobby for a more challenging curriculum, more black teachers, and more academic freedom.⁵⁹ E. Franklin Frazier found his first appointment at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Founded by Booker T. Washington, it was by far the

⁵⁶ John Edgar Tidwell and Ted Genoways, “Two Lost Sonnets by Sterling A. Brown,” *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998): 741.

⁵⁷ Brown, *My Own Life Story*, 37.

⁵⁸ “W. Allison Davis '24,” The Davis Centre, <http://davis-centre.williams.edu/daviscenter/allison-davis/>.

⁵⁹ St. Clair Drake, “In the Mirror of Black Scholarship: W. Allison Davis and *Deep South*,” in *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World*, ed. Atlanta G. A. Institute of the Black World and Cambridge M. A. Graduate School of Education Harvard Univ (Harvard Educational Review, 1974), 47.

most well-endowed of black colleges due to the political acumen of its founder and the appeasement strategies he utilised to gather the support of white southerners and northern philanthropists alike. Frazier found Tuskegee's approach and ethos stifling.⁶⁰ Frazier subsequently spent five years as Head of the Department of Social Work at Morehouse College in Atlanta, before his refusal to comply with the stifling segregation codes and his increasingly vocal articles on racial equality alienated him from the Board of Trustees.⁶¹

Brown's first teaching position provided him with an opportunity to immerse himself in southern black life. He met a number of people whose personalities, style and ways of living deeply impressed him and motivated him to write. These characters were to appear in his poetry, for example, Mrs Bibby and Calvin "Big Boy" Davies.⁶² He was also influenced by his students, men like Buckner who waited tables at the Hotel Jefferson and Fats Green who had worked on road-building gangs and knew many work-songs.⁶³ Brown felt that at Virginia Seminary, he learned what he could not learn at Williams, about the resilience and strength of African Americans but also the "humor" and "tragedy" of black life and its rich reservoir of folk tales and folk music.⁶⁴ Brown found, not a religious calling, but a different sort of vocation, which was to broaden and deepen his knowledge about black life in the South. Here his contact with black southerners of all classes started a relationship with the South and its African American inhabitants that would be central to his career.

After three years at Virginia Seminary, he took up a post at Lincoln University in Missouri in 1926. His two years in Missouri were happy ones. During the 1926 academic year, he shared a house with three other teachers. Students and the locals they introduced to Brown regularly visited his home for food, discussion and music and to continue their education outside the

⁶⁰ Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*, 31-35.

⁶¹ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 136-46.

⁶² Brown, "Sister Lou."; "When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home," *Opportunity* 5, 7 (1927); Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 38, 20.

⁶³ Sterling A. Brown, "Old Buck," in *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South*, ed. Sterling A. Brown, John Edgar Tidwell, and Mark A. Sanders (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37-50.

⁶⁴ "A Son's Return: 'Oh, Didn't He Ramble'," 15-16.

formal classroom setting. One of his former students at Lincoln, Nathaniel A. Sweets, describes the “at home gatherings” where “some of us learned about poems by Robert Burns that don’t appear in text books,” and “that would have had Brown railroaded out of town if he had read them in class.” At Brown’s house, his students mixed with various local characters from the neighbouring (and not so respectable) area of town called “The Foot.” Duke Diggs sang the ‘low-down’ blues while Brown strummed the guitar: “Sister, you’re gonna be called on for some of dat stuff you been sittin’ on.”⁶⁵

Many of Brown’s African American peers had strong connections to the South. There were often tangible family connections to the region. They were born in the southern states (Charles S. Johnson, Abram Harris, Zora Neale Hurston) or in the region bordering on the South (Sterling Brown, Allison Davis, E. Franklin Frazier, Langston Hughes).⁶⁶ Some of their families had travelled north to gain access to education and opportunities for advancement for themselves or their children. However, as Glenda Gilmore outlines, many of those who could not live under the repressive Jim Crow regime in the South were deeply committed to advocating for change from beyond its borders. Gilmore sees Washington D.C. “as a border post from which black southerners kept one eye on their country;” the New Negro Renaissance in Chicago and New York similarly had many southern expatriates in their midst.⁶⁷

Furthermore, black writers and social scientists were naturally drawn to the region where the majority of African Americans still lived in the 1920s under rigid segregation and often in abject poverty. This was not a static society. There were huge social, economic and demographic changes underway; 89 per cent of blacks lived in the South in 1910, by 1930 this had declined to 78.7 per cent. Migration was not only from South to North, there was also a steady movement off southern farms and into domestic, labouring and factory work

⁶⁵ Nathaniel A. Sweets, “Teacher - Prof. Brown at Lincoln Univ. The Roaring Twenties,” in *Sterling A. Brown: A UMUM Tribute*, ed. Black History Museum Committee (1982), 47-48.

⁶⁶ See Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 23-36. Although Ralph Bunche was born in Detroit, his grandmother Lucy Taylor Johnson was his main carer, and she was born and raised in the border state of Missouri.

⁶⁷ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie : The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: Norton, 2009), 24.

in the southern cities.⁶⁸ Hence, there was a desire to capture southern life as it was and to understand the changes and what they might mean for African Americans.

Although later historians romanticised Brown's years in the South, his career trajectory in this decade was not dissimilar to that of other black scholars who were drawn south for a number of reasons. These included the discriminatory hiring practices of white universities nationwide, which pushed them instead into southern black colleges. They had to live under rigid segregation but there were rewards. These included the opportunity to live amongst and study the region in which the majority of African Americans lived and which was undergoing sweeping changes. This meant that as the New Negro Renaissance unfolded in the 1920s, Brown and his contemporaries would engage with it from afar.

Taking Part in the New Negro Renaissance

The opportunities that African Americans had found for employment during the First World War, particularly in cities with high levels of industrial production, continued to flourish during the 1920s. New York and its vibrant black metropolis, Harlem, attracted a constant stream of migrant workers. Alongside its population growth came an unprecedented interest in black literature and music, bringing publishers for aspiring poets and novelists such as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, financiers eager to put on musicals like *Shuffle Along* (1921), and an explosion in 'race records' selling millions of copies a year.⁶⁹

Brown, Frazier and Davis were teaching in the South but as the interest in black art and literature grew, they all showed some desire to be a part of it. When *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* ran its first literary competition, Brown took second prize for his essay about the African-American tenor

⁶⁸ Mark Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 10.

⁶⁹ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 202.

Roland Hayes, whilst Frazier won first prize for “Social Equality and the Negro.”⁷⁰ Having become Director of Research and Investigation at the National Urban League, Charles S. Johnson established its journal *Opportunity* in 1923. Research, advocacy for improvements in race relations, and challenges to scientific falsehoods about black inferiority were its central features. Aware that black writers were denied access to a wide audience, Johnson increasingly promoted art, literature and music within its pages and through associated events such as the annual competition.

“Roland Hayes,” Brown’s earliest published essay, demonstrates that from the outset his perspective on black life had the social and political situation of African Americans at its core. Brown described the behaviour of the vertically integrated audience of 5,000 (blacks and whites were seated separately on opposite sides of the city auditorium in Atlanta at a 1925 performance sponsored by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation). He described the whites, ill-at-ease, squirming uncomfortably in surroundings far less salubrious than those to which they were normally accustomed and the blacks, self-conscious and unsettled in the mixed auditorium. He brought the reality of the segregated and coercive society of the South into his description of the audience applauding during an evening of surface unity:

Emotion has gripped the faces and the hands obey its dictates. The noise startles the blackness of Main Street, more than a flaming cross borne by ghostlike creatures ever startled.

With a nod to the violent reality of the racist conditions in which black and white southerners co-existed in their daily lives, he nevertheless ended the piece positively “Roland Hayes sings, and for that singing moment, however brief, the world forgets its tyranny and its submissiveness.”⁷¹

Brown was a young writer living far away from Harlem and he was not included in the early publications of the Renaissance: the special edition of

⁷⁰ “Opportunity Prizewinners,” *Opportunity* 3, May 1925 (1925): 142-43. Langston Hughes won first prize in poetry for “The Weary Blues” and Zora Neale Hurston second prizes in fiction and drama for “Spunk” and “Color Struck.”

⁷¹ Sterling A. Brown, “Roland Hayes,” *ibid.*, 6: 173-74.

the social work magazine *Survey Graphic* edited by Alain Locke in early 1925, or Locke's extended volume published later that year as *The New Negro*. However, in late 1925, Johnson asked Brown to review two books for the January 1926 edition of *Opportunity*. This was the beginning of Brown's association with the journal, in which he had a regular column for many years.⁷² Abram Harris, Allison Davis, and E. Franklin Frazier also wrote for *Opportunity*.

Black intellectuals debated whether the Renaissance would aid or hinder agitation for civil rights. Contemporaries argued about whether literature should act as race propaganda. Du Bois aired highly critical views of new novels such as Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho* (both published in 1928). Du Bois was concerned that literature that depicted the grittier side of life would feed into negative stereotypes of black Americans as decadent and primitive, and as lacking in morality and self-control. Alice Dunbar-Nelson, the widow of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, shared his distain for "portrayals of Harlem 'low-life'" and believed that "an ennobling literature devoted to black middle-class expression and concerns was more representative."⁷³

The drive by some black intellectuals to police the subject matter of black fiction should be seen in the context of a virtual invasion of Harlem by white New Yorkers looking for entertainment."⁷⁴ Whites were attracted to Harlem for reasons other than cabaret and the Charleston. Sex, drugs and alcohol were easily available, with the added frisson of association across the colour line. After the First World War, the 'Lost Generation,' bored with conformity and respectability, was fascinated by Freud's writings about sex and repression and captivated by a modernist interest in the art of Africa and other 'primitive' societies. Black Americans symbolised freedom amidst stereotyped notions of greater expressiveness, frenzied jazz music, and unharnessed sexuality, as Brown later put it: "the Negro's savage inheritance,

⁷² Brown was to publish more than fifty reviews in *Opportunity*, most in a regular column titled "The Literary Scene – Chronicle and Comment."

⁷³ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 225.

⁷⁴ Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," *The American Mercury* (1927): 398.

as they conceived it: hot jungle nights, the tom-tom calling to esoteric orgies.”⁷⁵

White critics and supporters such as Carl Van Vechten were influential in generating interest in African American art and culture. Van Vechten nurtured talented writers such as Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston, reviewing their work, encouraging publishers to take them on, and hosting parties where blacks and whites could mingle to mutual advantage. Some felt Van Vechten exploited black artists, particularly on the publication of his novel *Nigger Heaven* in 1926. Its depiction of the apparently lurid lives of Harlem residents was criticised by a number of African American intellectuals including W. E. B. Du Bois, Sterling Brown and Allison Davis.⁷⁶ Although Brown’s contemporaries Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were heavily dependent on a demanding and autocratic white patron Mrs Osgood Mason in this period,⁷⁷ Brown avoided the sort of interracial gatherings hosted by Van Vechten and did not enter into any patronage arrangements.

Within the black intellectual community, there were significant differences in views. Some classically trained scholars such as Du Bois and Alain Locke believed in the cultivation of African American art, to be refined towards a classical European form rather than preserved in its raw, original and unique state. Roland Hayes’s presentation of spirituals in more formal arrangements was an example of the former. The motivation was to demonstrate the refinement, artistic ability and intellectual capacity of black Americans.⁷⁸ Whilst Brown actively sought opportunities to immerse himself in the talk, jokes, and music of working class African Americans, Du Bois and Locke, although intellectually interested in that folk inheritance, struggled to “be

⁷⁵ Sterling A. Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *The Journal of Negro Education* 2, 2 (1933): 197-98.

⁷⁶ Allison Davis, "Our Negro Intellectuals," *The Crisis* 35, 8 (1928): 268-69; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Review of *Nigger Heaven*," *ibid.* 33 (1926): 81-82; Sterling A. Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* ([S.l.]: Arno Press, 1969), 132.

⁷⁷ Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes. Vol. 1*, 149-59.

⁷⁸ Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River : Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 59-112.

absorbed in it and really soak it up.”⁷⁹ Brown’s views were similar to those of Langston Hughes, who rejected the disdain within the higher reaches of black society for jazz and blues and saw joy and pride in “the low-down folks, the so-called common element” who “furnish a wealth of colorful instinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations.”⁸⁰

Although Brown’s earliest published poetry was written in both classical and folk styles,⁸¹ it was his folk poetry and use of dialect that captured the experiences of the southern black folk and their strength and resistance to white supremacy. When “Old Man Buzzard” tells young Fred that his good luck will run out and that death will take away his girl, his “buddy on de next farm,” and his “good vittels,” he responds with equanimity:

Doan give a damn
Ef de good things go,
Game rooster yit,
Still kin crow,
Somp’n in my heart here
Makes me so.⁸²

Brown’s were stories of romantic love, migration to the cities and its effects, poverty, religion, socialising, and most of all, the joys and strains of daily living and dying, whether in the segregated south or with the pressures that city life brought to bear on black Americans. Though deeply concerned by the situation of African Americans, he described their struggles dispassionately and without polemics. His poetry, however, was political in intent, as it outlined the reality of life under Jim Crow in the rural South and in the face of pervasive discrimination in the cities. By 1929, his reputation had grown, although his profile was limited to black publications.⁸³ When

⁷⁹ Rowell and Brown, ““Let Me Be Wid Ole Jazzbo”: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown,” 795-815.

⁸⁰ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation* (1926): 692-94.

⁸¹ Sterling A. Brown, “Salutamus,” “To a Certain Lady in Her Garden,” and “Odyssey of Big Boy,” in Countee Cullen, *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (New York; London: Harper & Bros., 1927); “Riverbank Blues,” *Opportunity* 7, 5 (1929). All reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 106, 07, 20, 90. The first two poems were written in classical style, the latter two in folk style.

⁸² “Old Man Buzzard,” *The Carolina Magazine* LVIII (1927). Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 40.

⁸³ His poetry and a number of book reviews and essays had been published in *Opportunity*. Poems also appeared in the NAACP’s journal *The Crisis*, and *The Carolina Magazine*. Six of his poems were included in Cullen, *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*.

Charles S. Johnson published the anthology *Ebony and Topaz* in 1928 as he resigned his role at the Urban League, he included works by Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. Also included was writing by the black colleagues Brown would draw closer to in the 1930s: Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier and Allison Davis.⁸⁴

Brown was full of artistic plans, keen to get started on a novel and equally eagerly following up funding to train as an actor. He joined the Fisk faculty in 1928, and alongside Horace Mann Bond in education, political science and history and Charles S. Johnson in sociology, he felt part of an intellectual community that could influence scholarship about black Americans.⁸⁵ Johnson was working on *The Negro in American Civilization* and Brown taught a class based on the manuscript.⁸⁶ Throughout his years in the South, his father had encouraged him not to focus solely on literature, telling him “you possess the native gift, high and invincible leadership” and asking him to consider history or administration so that he could “initiate and direct the forces of men.”⁸⁷ In 1929, Reverend Brown became very ill. In one of his last letters to his son, he continued to urge him to serve the race:

Turn your attention to studies that point to administration. This may serve you in future years to great purpose.⁸⁸

In his autobiography, he had set out clearly the expectation of duty to family and described how he had provided for his parents and siblings. After his death, his son took up the mantle of provider and returned to Washington DC to a teaching position at Howard to support the family.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Charles S. Johnson, *Ebony and Topaz : A Collectanea* (New York: Published by Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life : National Urban League, 1927).

⁸⁵ Tidwell, Brown, and Wright, ““Steady and Unaccusing”: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown,” 816. “I’ll tell you where I started on *us* – under Charles S. Johnson. Imagine this lineup at Fisk in 1928-29. Horace Mann Bond in education, political science, history; Charles S. Johnson in sociology; and me in literature.”

⁸⁶ Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization; a Study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1930).

⁸⁷ Sterling N. Brown to Sterling A. Brown, 6 Jun 1927, Sterling A. Brown Papers, Box 6, Folder Br, Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁸⁸ Sterling N. Brown to Sterling A. Brown, 12 Jun 1927, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 6, Folder Br.

⁸⁹ Year: 1930; Census Place: Roanoke, Roanoke (Independent City), Virginia; Roll: 2481; Page: 21b; Enumeration District: 8; Image: 1100.0, U. S. Bureau of the Census. This included his mother Adelaide, his two unmarried sisters, and his wife Daisy (they married in September 1927). Her nephew John Dennis would come to live with them as the Browns informally adopted him on the death of Daisy’s sister.

The 1920s provided Brown with the opportunity for immersion in southern life and for contact with black southerners of all classes. He became well versed in African American folklore and used it to strong effect in his poetry, alongside an understanding of the structures that perpetuated inequality in southern life and in literature. Although he was not at the geographical heart of the New Negro Renaissance, he did engage with the movement and formed strong views about the controversies that it engendered. Appalled by the disdainful attitudes of certain members of the black elite in relation to the black masses, Brown abhorred any tendency to portray a propagandistic version of black life. He was equally scornful of images of black life as lived in wild abandon in keeping with stereotypes about Africa. Lastly, he was aware of a weight of responsibility upon his shoulders as a black intellectual and as a 'leader' of the race. Each of these themes will recur below in discussion of the shared views Brown developed with black contemporaries in the social sciences in the 1930s and would be as relevant to their efforts in the social sciences in that decade as in the heady days of the New Negro Renaissance.⁹⁰

Brown and the 'Howard Radicals'

In a 1932 review of Edwin Embree's *Brown America*, Sterling Brown urged black writers to take it upon themselves to collaborate with and interpret the 'folk,' rather than leaving the field to white folklore collectors, white editors and white authors whose writings "stir America and win Pulitzer Prizes." Reminding the elite that they were but one step removed from the masses, he urged them to develop "a consciousness of the common past of all Negroes, and our common destiny." Brown went on to posit that:

The Negro thinker and artist learns to sneer and gird at what he considers peculiarly "Negro" whereas any sort of perspective would

⁹⁰ See Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, xviii; Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*; Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left : African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars*. These historians have pointed to continuities across the decades, and in particular that black intellectuals were already closely associated with the Left before the Great Depression.

reveal that these peculiarities can be found in any people similarly placed, and that they have *definite causes that must be understood*.⁹¹

Brown urged black intellectuals to turn to the folk and to reveal the value of the “rock whence we were hewn.” In this, Brown and Langston Hughes shared a common view of African American culture as a shield, a tool and an evolving weapon in the struggle to survive and thrive within a racially oppressive society. He asked black artists and scholars to think wider than race, and *consider the social, economic and political position of blacks in America and what caused particular behaviours*. This objective was shared in a number of ways with Brown’s allies in the social sciences, particularly Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche.

At Howard, Brown drew closer to these colleagues in the social sciences than to those in the more conservative English Department. The outspoken Frazier became a regular visitor to Brown’s home. He had plenty of experience of collaboration with the ‘folk’ himself, having taught at various colleges in the South and spent a year in Denmark studying folk schools. He had also studied for a Masters in Sociology at Clark University and led the school of Social Work at Morehouse College, Atlanta. Having enrolled at the University of Chicago for his PhD, Frazier was employed by Charles S. Johnson at Fisk from 1929 until 1934, completing his dissertation on “The Negro Family in Chicago.” He then took up the position of Director of Sociology at Howard where, like Brown, he would remain for his entire career.

Economist Abram Harris had achieved his BA at Virginia Union, also worked under Charles S. Johnson (at the Urban League), obtained a Masters in Economics at Pittsburgh, carried out a study of the black population in Minneapolis in 1926, and started work for a PhD in Economics at Columbia.⁹² He began to teach at Howard in 1928. Ralph Bunche had a first degree in political science from UCLA, a masters from Harvard and by 1928

⁹¹ Sterling A. Brown, "The Literary Scene – Chronicle and Comment: More Odds," *Opportunity* 10, 6 (1932): 188-89.

⁹² Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 86-87.

was established in the new Howard Political Science Department. He received a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation to travel to Africa for research on the political systems in Togoland and Dahomey. In 1934, he became the first African American to be awarded a PhD in political science in the United States.⁹³

These three were part of a select group of twenty-seven young intellectuals invited by Joel Spingarn, President of the NAACP, to a conference at his home in Amenia in August 1933 because they were considered to be the future leaders of the race. Brown and his Howard colleagues argued that the NAACP should shift its focus to class and economics. In their view, the Great Depression provided an opportunity to pursue economic change for African Americans, class was as important as race in holding the race back, and the leaders' role was to support the development of an alliance based on educating white and black workers about their common interests and rights.⁹⁴

Following the conference, Abram Harris agreed to review the NAACP's aims and Brown was a member of his committee. Harris's final report contained recommendations for the NAACP to promote worker education, support labour activism on issues such as child labour, working conditions, pay and pensions, and segregation within the workforce; develop a local structure that could support research and teaching; and decentralise the organisation. The most controversial notion running through the report was that voiced at the conference, the idea that the NAACP should move away from its emphasis on racial issues and instead focus on class and economics. The Board struggled to see how it could attract members and funds to its organisation on this basis. Ultimately, the report was shelved and Harris resigned from the Board.⁹⁵

⁹³ Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 44-54.

⁹⁴ Eben Miller, *Born Along the Color Line : The 1933 Amenia Conference and the Rise of a National Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105-12.

⁹⁵ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 4-14, 90-102.

Although Brown is sometimes referred to as one of a group of ‘Young Radicals’ at Howard University in the early 1930s, there has been scant analysis of what connected his views to those of his contemporaries at Howard, apart from the sense that he advocated an interracial workers’ alliance as the best route to race equality.⁹⁶ The only comprehensive study of the Howard radicals in this period, Jonathan Scott’s *Confronting the Veil*, includes only Bunche, Harris and Frazier. In fact, Brown shared in the main the characteristics identified by Holloway amongst these three scholars. Firstly, that black intellectuals and activists should be more concerned with class than race; secondly, that there was no credibility to the notion that black Americans were essentially different from other Americans, which served as justification to treat the race differently; thirdly, that African Americans were not a homogenous group, that there was no such thing as ‘the Negro.’

Each of these contemporaries shared a core belief that it was unproductive to focus on racial interpretations of black American ‘problems.’ This was, in fact, a device to distract from the root causes of problems, which were structural and economic. Abram Harris made this argument consistently throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For example, in *Current History* in 1924, he argued that the growth of factory production and not race per se was the underlying cause of the Great Migration.⁹⁷ He was not arguing that race was irrelevant but rather that it was used to distract observers from the failures of industrial capitalism and to prevent the strengthening of interracial unity in labour.

Frazier dissected the relationship between economic class and African Americans’ status in society in 1935, outlining links between the needs of the economy and the expansion of slavery, how the ‘black codes’ functioned after Reconstruction, and the effects of industrialisation and migration on the economic subjugation of southern blacks. He argued that social status would only change with economic power, through “cooperation with white workers”

⁹⁶ Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 111.

⁹⁷ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 108.

in the “struggle for power between the proletariat and the owning classes.”⁹⁸ In 1936, Ralph Bunche emphasised that the low racial status of southern blacks was perpetuated because:

the numerically preponderant poor-white population feared the economic competition and the social and political power of the large black population.⁹⁹

Brown’s literary criticism set out the same thesis. In “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” Brown described not only the most prevalent stereotypes of African Americans but also the economic motivation behind them. He classified caricatures of African Americans prevalent in the literature: The Contented Slave, The Wretched Freedman, The Comic Negro, The Brute Negro, The Tragic Mulatto, The Local Color Negro, and The Exotic Primitive. In the antebellum period, when the cotton crop necessitated a large and stable workforce, pro-slavery novelists such as John P. Kennedy created the image of the contented slave, well looked after by a kindly master, both held in a union of mutual affection. There was little reference to the work in the fields and a great emphasis on songs, holidays, and festivals. There was no sense of slavery as an economic system, generating profit for the few and ensuring that poor whites as well as blacks were marginalised. The Comic Negro went hand in hand with the Contented Slave, for how could the easy-going black man “ludicrous to others, and forever laughing himself” be dissatisfied with his situation.¹⁰⁰

After the Civil War, whites were faced with new dangers including African Americans voting, taking their labour elsewhere or leaving for education. New stereotypes emerged: the Wretched Freedman, who once released from bondage is incapable of managing life without his white protector; and the Brute Negro, who following Reconstruction, is unable to control the lust and rage kept at bay when he was a slave. To discourage miscegenation, the Tragic Mulatto was created with inherited weaknesses through black blood and none of the strengths of the white bloodline. Emotional, lustful, yet

⁹⁸ E. Franklin Frazier, “The Status of the Negro in the American Social Order,” *Journal of Negro Education* 4, 3 (1935): 293-307.

⁹⁹ Ralph J. Bunche, *A World View of Race* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 78.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” 189-91.

without the power of rational thought, the mulatto fitted into neither black nor white society.¹⁰¹

In the stereotypes of the Comic Negro and the Exotic Primitive, Brown articulated a second fabrication about black Americans denounced by Harris, Bunche, Frazier and himself. This was the notion that black Americans were essentially different from other Americans and hence could be treated differently. Even if callous treatment or outright cruelty did take place, their peculiarities meant that such handling could not damage them. The Exotic Primitive was a new stereotype, which Brown denounced as nothing more than a “jazzed-up” version of the Contented Slave “with cabarets supplanting cabins, and Harlemized ‘blues’ instead of the spirituals and slave reels.” In fact this newest stereotype had irritated Brown since the inception of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁰² When he had described Roland Hayes’s rendition of Dvorak’s “The Waters of Babylon,” he emphasised how the Zionists’ enslavers “required of us a song” and “required of us mirth.” Brown made the comparison to the present day American society that required blacks to debase their culture for a white audience: “girls prostitute their voices singing jazz for a decadent white and black crowd”; musicians producing “cheap little well-made bits of musical bric-a-brac.”¹⁰³ African Americans were required to perform, to sing, to joke for their slave masters. The pressure continued beyond slavery and into the twentieth century in the cabarets and nightclubs of northern cities like New York and Chicago. In his classic examination of the relationship between racist ideology and the wider social, political and intellectual developments from the nineteenth century forward, George M. Fredrickson remarks upon the “national fad” for a revived racialized romanticism in the 1920s in part as a result of white patronage for the New

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Moses notes the opposing manifestations of ‘civilizationism’ (i.e. aspiring to a higher culture in terms of the arts and science) and primitivism in the thinking of New Negro modernists, and agrees with Sterling Brown’s assertion that “Negro renaissance modernists redeemed nineteenth-century racist stereotypes in their depiction of African American culture. ... Committed to the cult of ‘primitivism,’ New Negroes admired African natives because they were presumably innocent of the influences of both Christianity and civilization [which] enervated the virility of primitive tribes.” Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 236-37.

¹⁰³ Brown, “Roland Hayes.”

Negro Renaissance.¹⁰⁴ As critic Stephen Henderson concluded in relation to Brown's poem "Cabaret" written about a floorshow at a 1927 Chicago nightclub,¹⁰⁵ Brown's target was "nothing less than the prostituting of black life by the large society and the capitalistic system".¹⁰⁶

Brown and the Howard Radicals repeatedly challenged two very different mechanisms and sets of people that played on the concept of race difference. The first were those who used scientific racism to bolster white supremacy; the second were those involved in the New Negro Renaissance who condoned and perpetuated images of the African American as 'other.' Thus in 1936, Bunche still felt it was necessary to attack the biological definitions of race put forward by a range of scientists and to demonstrate that the "selection of any specific physical trait or set of traits as a basis for identifying racial groups [was] a purely arbitrary process."¹⁰⁷ Frazier denounced eugenics and challenged scientific racism, but generally used publishing opportunities to demonstrate the social and environmental causes of the behaviours that scientific racists argued was due to biology.¹⁰⁸

This desire to demonstrate that 'the Negro' was an American, not an essentially different being, was at the root of Brown, Bunche, Harris and Frazier's opposition to aspects of the New Negro Renaissance that would reverberate forward into later important projects such as the Carnegie Study of the Negro in America. In 1925, Harris criticised sociologist Grove Dow for his "special treatment" of

certain Negroid traits, the causation of which is sought by fashioning a highly questionable psychological and social relationship between the aboriginal African and the American Negro.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press. , 1987), 327.

¹⁰⁵ Sterling A. Brown, "Cabaret," in *Southern Road: Poems*, ed. Sterling A. Brown (New York: Beacon, 1974), First published New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932. Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 101-03.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen E. Henderson, "The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown: A Study of Craft and Tradition," in *After Winter the Art and Life of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 43.

¹⁰⁷ Bunche, *A World View of Race*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*, 162-63.

¹⁰⁹ Abram Harris, "Defining the Negro Problem," *Opportunity* 3 (1925): 26-27.

In a 1926 review, Brown noted the even-handedness of the authors of two books about Africa in depicting “qualities of the African scene other than savagery, bestiality and predestined malignance...” The implication was that their ‘even-handedness’ was an exception to the general rule. Brown quoted from the popular Vachel Lindsay poem “The Congo” to make his point about the current fashionable image of Africa:

And “BLOOD” screamed the whistles and the fifes of the warriors
“BLOOD” screamed the skull-faced lean witchdoctors

Brown noted sardonically that American blacks were driven to feel they had to go headhunting, burn their books and beat the tom-tom.¹¹⁰ In 1931, he reviewed Seabrook’s *Jungle Ways* and noted that the mainstream reader would lap up the more exotic stuff: “enough for the titillation of all the reading clubs: weird ceremonies, bloodletting, phallic worship, all kinds of manifestations of sex.”¹¹¹

To Brown and his colleagues, categorising the African American as essentially different with continuing cultural links to Africa could be used as a means of validating their exclusion from economic and social opportunities through segregation and could imply that the cultural practices of working class blacks were caused by their cultural heritage in Africa, rather than the structural forces that blocked their access to decent housing, education and employment. Hence when sociologist George Haynes suggested that black folkways be taken into consideration when formulating theses about black life, Harris reprimanded him for suggesting black Americans should be treated differently: “We know that leads us up a blind alley.”¹¹²

Another important area of agreement was their insistence that African Americans were not a homogenous group. Frazier, in *La Bourgeoisie Noire* (1929), articulated the different class interests within black America and the strong self-interest that motivated the black middle-class to emulate white

¹¹⁰ Sterling A. Brown, “Book Shelf – Two African Heroines” (Review of *The Sailor’s Return* by David Garnett, and *Mambu, Et Son Amour* by Louis Charbonneau), *ibid.* 4, 1 (1926).

¹¹¹ “The Literary Scene – Chronicle and Comment: As to *Jungle Ways*,” *Opportunity* 9, 7 (1931): 219-21.

¹¹² Keith P. Griffler, *What Price Alliance? : Black Radicals Confront White Labor, 1918-1938* (New York: Garland, 1995), 149-50.

Americans without considering what would benefit the black masses.¹¹³ In 1923, Harris criticised the desire of older race leaders to present a “solid front” on racial matters and in doing so threatening the freedom of thought and speech that black Americans were beginning to demonstrate.¹¹⁴ Brown took black folklorist J. Mason Brewer to task for suggesting that black Texans were homogenous:

Surely Mr Brewer does not wish us to infer that the Negroes he portrays approximate more closely [than Harlem Negroes] that mythical non-entity “the Negro.” As large as Texas may be, there are still fifty-six other varieties of Negro for the asking.¹¹⁵

Frequently the prefaces to novels or studies of black folklore or history alluded to the authors’ ability and authority to portray ‘The Negro’ as if African Americans were a homogenous entity composed of identical characteristics. Brown noted the absurdity of the assumption that white plantation owner “Mrs [Julia] Peterkin knows the Negro,” remarking that it “would be more accurate to say that she has carefully studied a certain section of Negro life, restricted in scope and in character...”¹¹⁶ Brown also took black writer Benjamin Brawley to task on proclaiming such a “treacherously slippery” thing as ‘The Negro Genius,’ ascribing it to dark-skinned blacks with an apparent genius in music (linked to the imaginative and sensuous and subjective) rather than in scientific pursuits.¹¹⁷

Brown also held much in common with Charles S. Johnson at Fisk. Much has been made of Johnson’s diplomatic skills, which enabled him to maximise funding for his Sociology Department at Fisk from the philanthropic foundations and meant he was one of the few black intellectuals involved in interracial commissions alongside the more liberal white southerners. Because of this, Johnson has been characterised as exceedingly moderate,

¹¹³ Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*, 151-52.

¹¹⁴ Abram Harris, “The Negro Problem as Viewed by Negro Leaders,” *Current History* 18 (1923): 410-18.

¹¹⁵ Sterling A. Brown, “The Literary Scene – Chronicle and Comment: From the Southwest,” *Opportunity* 11, 10 (1933): 313.

¹¹⁶ “The Literary Scene – Chronicle and Comment: Local Color or Interpretation,” *Opportunity* 10, 7 (1932): 223.

¹¹⁷ “Book Review *The Negro Genius* by Benjamin Brawley,” *Opportunity* 15, 9 (1937): 280-81.

sometimes conservative, and depicted as a rather obsequious character who bowed to white hegemony.¹¹⁸

The criticisms of Johnson as conservative stemmed in part from his relationship with his adviser and mentor, Robert Park. Johnson was the first African American to train in sociology under Park, who led the Chicago Sociology Department from 1912-1934. Park was the leading sociologist researching African Americans and race relations. He defined the pattern of race relations as a slow cycle that moved through four phases - from competition to conflict to accommodation to assimilation. Crucially, the cycle was subject to natural laws and Park did not believe that the pace of change within the cycle could be accelerated. Gasman and Gilpin argue convincingly that by the 1930s, Johnson had moved away from Park's passive stance and believed that the Federal Government could have a role in accelerating change through social programmes and statute. He argued for housing laws to be introduced and enforced for low income people, for investment in public housing, removal of residential racial restrictions, education to promote the inclusion of black workers in industry, federal intervention in agriculture.¹¹⁹

What he had in common with Sterling Brown in this period was a belief in the potential mobility of African Americans and that the main issue was class, not caste. Social anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner at Harvard argued that black Americans were a caste and hence their status was fixed. Johnson refuted this. If they were in a fixed system, why was so much energy expended in the South on maintaining the system? Johnson, like Brown and the Howard Radicals, believed that it was possible and necessary to change attitudes to race and affect the pace of change in race relations. He believed that this could be achieved through affecting public opinion and through formal education.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Jones, "The Tradition of Sociology Teaching in Black Colleges: The Unheralded Professionals," 121-59.

¹¹⁹ Gilpin and Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson : Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, 72-74.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-69.

Brown, Harris, Bunche and Frazier believed in these years that nurturing unity between black and white workers within organised labour would bring progress towards equality for African Americans. Frazier had articulated this view in his prize winning *Opportunity* essay of 1925, hoping that the “Negro may become an integral part of the proletariat” and that as he did “the feeling against his color may break down in the face of a common foe.”¹²¹ Although Brown shared a similar perspective to Harris, Bunche and Frazier in relation to the underlying causes of racial oppression, there were differences in their emphasis in understanding black life. Most notably, Brown focused on the black cultural tradition in a way that they did not. In this, he had more in common with Charles S. Johnson at Fisk than with the Howard radicals.

In retrospect, the optimism of the Howard radicals and Charles S. Johnson about the potential for unity across the colour line may appear naïve given the pervasive racism of working-class whites against blacks, but black and white activists in the 1930s shared this optimism and saw real possibilities for change. In Arkansas, where H. L. Mitchell established the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in 1934, membership rose to more than 30,000 across six states by 1937, and one third of its members were black.¹²² The National Negro Congress, established in 1936 by Bunche, lawyer John P. Davis, and A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, fought to bring black workers into unions, helped to organise sit downs and strikes for better conditions for black and white workers, and campaigned against police brutality and lynching.¹²³

Brown and his contemporaries aimed to demonstrate that economic interests, i.e. control over power, resources and status, were the driving forces for perpetuating segregation and oppression. They wanted to transform public understanding and opinion of the race problem. Brown attempted to change attitudes and opinions through his writing. In the mid 1930s, he updated his 1933 article on stereotypes in literature for *The Negro*

¹²¹ E. Franklin Frazier, “Social Equality and the Negro,” *Opportunity* 3 (1925): 165-68.

¹²² Louis Mazzari, *Southern Modernist : Arthur Raper from the New Deal to the Cold War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 156.

¹²³ Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow : The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

in *American Fiction*, part of Alain Locke's Bronze Booklet series and intended for a wide adult readership. He had also continued to write poetry but struggled to find a willing publisher for his second collection, *No Hiding Place*. Nevertheless, individual poems appeared in *The New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, *The Crisis*, *Esquire*, *Poetry*, and *The Nation* and they were left-wing, hard-hitting and critical.

These poems indicate his continuing interest in the South and his, by now, more explicitly political views on the system of racial oppression. They also show the strengths of southern black culture, the humour and wit, and the daily acts of resistance to unfair treatment. He lambasted southern stereotypes of gambolling pickaninnies with a direct contrast to the reality of poverty in the South, where the desperate "dart thin wrists in glittering garbage pails" foraging for food. "Bitter Fruit of the Tree" exposed the experiences of a southern family under the contemporary sharecropping system as little different to the previous generations' experiences under slavery, yet the white refrain of "please do not be bitter" continued to be heard.¹²⁴

In "The Young Ones," black children were unable to play because of the economic exigency to plant every available inch of ground with cotton. The family was trapped in poverty:

The spare-ribbed yard dog
Has gone away;
The kids, just as hungry,
Have to stay.

Brown highlighted the traps and contradictions of the sharecropping system in the same way as Charles S. Johnson did in *Shadow of the Plantation* in 1934.¹²⁵ This was a social and economic study of the black residents of Macon County in Alabama. Johnson described their situation as "a legacy of slavery," and studied their lives, their family structures, and the economic

¹²⁴ Sterling A. Brown, "All Are Gay," in *American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose & Verse*, ed. Federal Writers Project (New York: Viking Press, 1937); "Bitter Fruit of the True," *The Nation* 149 (1939). Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 183-85, 90.

¹²⁵ Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*.

constraints upon them. Using the medium of poetry, Brown expressed the same dilemmas: a newborn baby brought little joy to his mother, “Another one to grow up/ Underfed,” whilst by contrast, his father praised God for providing “two more hands/ For to carry a row”.¹²⁶

Brown’s frustration at the glacial pace of change to race relations was evident in “Transfer.” Having failed to address the white streetcar conductor as “Sir,” a black man is beaten mercilessly and sent to the penitentiary for “bruising white knuckles, inciting to riot.” Brown’s hero is unbowed and exhorts his fellow black southerners to abandon their stance of submission and stand up against their oppressors:

But this is the wrong line we been riding’,
This route doan git us where we got to go.
Got to git transferred to a new direction.
We can stand so much, then doan stan no mo’.¹²⁷

Brown shared with colleagues at Howard the hope that change could be accelerated if workers recognised a common interest across racial lines. He wrote directly about the interracial workers’ movement for labour rights and equality. In ‘Colloquy,’ he expounded on black fears that if they joined with white workers across the racial divide, the labour organisations such as the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organisations would let the black workforce down. Brown based the poem on a folktale. In the last stanza the black man says (to the white man):

so I tells you like the frog saying to the eagle flying cross the stone
quarry high in the sky, ‘don’t do it big boy, don’t do it to me, not now
while we’s up so high.’¹²⁸

Brown also continued to tear down stereotypes about African Americans within a dominant national culture that demeaned black people and their behaviour daily. These stereotyped images were prevalent in the national

¹²⁶ Sterling A. Brown, “The Young Ones,” *Poetry* 3 (1938). Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 169.

¹²⁷ “Transfer,” *Partisan Review* 3, 6 (1936). Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 180-81.

¹²⁸ FS-6241: Sterling A. Brown, Yale University, 18 Apr 1979. Tape 1.#20367, Sub-series 4.1.1. Field Recordings 1971-1976, undated. Box S-20367/Carousel 23.

media. Octavius Cohen's Florian Slappey stories, published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and reprinted widely in local papers across the country, were filled with preposterous dialect, fights in nightclubs accompanied by cartoons of fat-lipped, fleshy Negroes.¹²⁹ In radio, newspapers, songs, novels and advertising, African American culture was mocked with images of 'niggers' gobbling watermelon and chicken, downing gin, wielding razors, dressing 'flash', speaking in a comical dialect, using pompous words in the wrong context, engaged in buffoonery, crooning minstrel melodies.

Brown's character Scrappy, in "Puttin' on Dog," was the sort of African American that racist white authors such as Cohen would parody but Brown showcased him as a hero. Scrappy is dressed to the nines: "With a brand new silk shirt pink as a sunsheet/ Wid a pair o' suspenders blue as the sky." After a bar room fight and sentenced to the work gang, he is irrepressible, "and even had his own way of bustin' up rock." Shot and killed by his rival Buck, he is immaculate when laid out in his coffin "puttin' on dog in a pinebox." Brown ends with a salutation for his inextinguishable spirit: "Oh you rascal, puttin' on dog/ Great Gawd but you was a man!"¹³⁰ As critic Mark Sanders demonstrates, in writing about Scrappy, Brown "celebrates the manner of life, the style and flair, that perpetually states authority."¹³¹

In contrast, Brown's colleagues at Howard did not place black culture at the centre of their world view. Harris thought that black Americans had been completely assimilated and that the notion of 'Negro culture' was "merely a device which he has contrived to compensate his thwarted ambition for full participation in American institutions."¹³² Bunche would gain some insight into culture when he spent a year undertaking post-doctoral training in anthropology in Chicago, London and South Africa in 1936, but it was never central to his thinking.¹³³

¹²⁹ Bernard A. Drew, *Black Stereotypes in Popular Series Fiction, 1851-1955: Jim Crow Era Authors and Their Characters* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015), 125-44.

¹³⁰ Sterling A. Brown, "Puttin' on Dog," in *Folk-Say IV, the Land Is Ours*, ed. B.A. Botkin (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932).

¹³¹ Sanders, *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics & the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown*, 124.

¹³² A. L. Harris, "Economic Foundations of American Race Division," *Social Forces Social Forces* 5, 3 (1927): 468-78.

¹³³ Henry, *Ralph Bunche : Model Negro or American Other?* 71, 75.

Frazier had a more complicated attitude to black culture. He certainly denied that African American culture contained survivals of African cultural traits, noting in 1930 that there was “scarcely any evidence that the traditions of Africa took root in American soil.”¹³⁴ However, Anthony Platt has pointed out the tremendous diversity captured by Frazier within his studies of black family life. Like Brown, he actively made connections with the poor in order to accurately document their lives. He taught in many high schools and colleges in the South before arriving at Howard in 1934. He carried out extensive fieldwork in poor black communities for his studies of black longshoremen in New York and black families in Chicago and Tennessee. His work in these years “was filled with ethnographic richness and complexity based on firsthand experience and appreciation of the subjective factor in social life.”¹³⁵

Brown’s objective in this period was to convince his audience to look beyond race to the root causes of inequality, which he believed related to class and economics. He shared this belief with Bunche, Frazier and Harris but also to some extent with Charles S. Johnson whom he had known since the 1920s. Although in the early part of the 1930s he was using the medium of poetry and criticism, he conveyed a similar set of ideas as his colleagues in political science, sociology and economics. They were each equally concerned with tearing down notions that African Americans were different from other Americans and eager to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the black American population. Much of their energy was directed at promoting a perspective on race relations that went beyond race to class. However, Brown concentrated on a rich portrayal of the African American experiences and the way they expressed themselves through talk, clothing, song, jokes, and interactions within an oppressive structure, whereas his sociologist colleagues focused on the whole on those structures and systems.

¹³⁴ E. Franklin Frazier, “The Negro Slave Family,” *The Journal of Negro History* 15, 2 (1930): 203.

¹³⁵ Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*, 122.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that contrary to later interpretations, the black intellectuals active in the first half of the twentieth century were participants within a continuing tradition of race pride and resistance to white supremacy. Sterling Brown's father was an influential figure in his son's life and conveyed his belief in racial uplift in the sense it was understood during Reconstruction, as an absolute right to equal citizenship, not a privilege to be earned by conforming to certain behaviours. He also led by example in speaking out against violence, hypocrisy and the increasing encroachment on civil rights as Jim Crow became the norm in Washington D.C. and in the southern states. Brown's family and those of his contemporaries felt the impact of segregation and had personal contact with racial tensions in their formative years.

Education was rated highly in Brown's family and in those of his peers. At college and university, he received a classical training in literature and he also began to understand how stereotypes were used across cultures and national boundaries to restrict opportunities for minority groups to advance within society. Literature was used for a political purpose to maintain an unequal system. Brown continued his education during the years he taught in the South. Although later critics romanticised his years in the South as an Odyssey, I have demonstrated that his journey was as likely to have been for pragmatic reasons given the limited opportunities for black scholars in higher education in the North. Working in the conservative atmosphere of southern black colleges was stifling for many of Brown's contemporaries but he took the opportunity to immerse himself in southern life and become an astute observer and chronicler of people, places and relationships. At Fisk, under the leadership of Charles S. Johnson, he felt he had found his focus "on us," on the black American experience.

Brown and his colleagues observed and critiqued the New Negro Renaissance from a distance but they also participated. Many of the controversies of the Renaissance would affect their thinking in the following decades. They knew

that they wanted to look beyond the black elite and to describe and understand black life as it affected the majority of blacks who lived in the South. They also recoiled from stereotypes of black life, regardless of whether they were put forward by educated black Americans or the white mainstream. The notion of white patronage would also reverberate forward into their working lives in the years to follow, as they sought as black intellectuals to maintain their integrity whilst earning enough to support themselves and fund their professional endeavours.

Duty called Brown back to Washington D.C. at the end of the 1920s and brought him into closer alliance with his colleagues in the social sciences at Howard University. As I have demonstrated above, they and Charles S. Johnson argued that race relations would only improve if the situation of African Americans was placed firmly in the context of economic and class structures which perpetuated unequal treatment to the advantage of the wider society, particularly in the South. Brown and his colleagues' views were not blinkered by their middle class upbringing. They had significant contact with a wide range of black communities and individuals through their teaching and research. In the decades to come, they would walk a careful line between their own activism and the requirements of their professions to be dispassionate and objective. They would try within that narrow space to develop their own concept of race relations. In this period, the Howard group was attempting to influence the building and dissemination of knowledge about African Americans within a challenging context.

Brown up to this point had used a different medium (poetry and criticism) than Bunche, Frazier, Harris or Charles S. Johnson to persuade his audience to think about the underlying economic drivers for perpetuating white supremacy. However, as I will demonstrate within the thesis, in search of other means to reach a wider audience to promote the civil rights of African Americans, he moved gradually away from creative expression and into sociological inquiry in the course of the 1930s. In so doing, however, he would not leave behind the interest in black life, its music, history, and

folklore, which he had used so powerfully in his poetry. In putting African American culture at the heart of his efforts, he was different from his African American peers.

Chapter 2. New Definitions of American Folklore: Sterling A. Brown and Benjamin A. Botkin

Introduction

In 1942, Sterling Brown described his approach to folklore at a conference of professional folklorists. Noting that he had first developed an interest in folklore to “get for my own writing a flavor, a color, a pungency of speech,” he described his subsequent important realisation that he could use folklore “to get an understanding of people, to acquire an accuracy in the portrayal of their lives.” Brown emphasised that he was an amateur but nevertheless noted the importance of collecting living histories for “the light they shed on social history and on Negro life and character” and “the approach to these people as human beings.” He also described the influence on his own work of:

a trend toward the collecting and the using of a living folklore – the living speech of the people. I know some of the difficulties in defining this “folk,” and I imagine that many of the people I have gone to are not folk. This hasn’t bothered me particularly, since my interest was not scientific. I wanted to write of people with some accuracy as to their life and character.¹

Folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin, who would later coin the term “living lore,” was also present and was, no doubt, responsible for Brown’s invitation. For Brown and Botkin were close friends and intellectual allies. They had, a decade earlier, and whilst separated by more than a thousand miles, realised that they had a common perspective and set of values in relation to folklore.

Their alliance began with *Folk-Say*, an anthology of folk materials edited by Benjamin Botkin that was published annually in the years 1929 to 1934. In August 1931, folklorist and linguist Professor Aurelio Espinosa of Stanford University reviewed *Folk-Say 1930* for the journal *American Speech*. He found his reviewing task troublesome: “The 1930 volume ... contains such a variety of materials that the reviewer is bewildered in attempting to make an

¹ Sterling A. Brown, “The Approach of the Creative Artist, Notes from a Talk Given to the Conference on the Character and State of Folklore Studies Held in Washington D.C. In April 1942,” *Journal Of American Folklore* 59, 234 (1946): 506-07.

estimate of its character and values..." Irritated by the eclectic nature of *Folk-Say's* contents, Espinosa was also unnerved by the audacity of its editor Benjamin A. Botkin in challenging those studying folklore to broaden their perspective. For within *Folk-Say*, Botkin urged scholars to lift their sights from the "lore" they collected towards the people from whom they collected, the "folk" themselves. Just as contentiously, he urged them to go beyond "collection and classification" toward "creative (including re-creative) interpretation." In Botkin's opinion, a folklorist's role consisted of more than gathering and categorizing data; it implied a wider responsibility for the interpretation of folk materials in the context of people's lives. Most controversially, this sort of folklorist could perhaps even recycle folk materials into new forms of folklore or folk art.

Espinosa dismissed the insolent newcomer:

Folklore is a science, its field has been satisfactorily defined and it has developed courageously into one of the leading fields of modern investigation. It is now too late to begin to quibble about its meaning and values.

Having extolled the stability of the profession and denounced Botkin's positing of an alternative approach, Espinosa went on to quote the boatman from the Old Spanish ballad of Count Arnaldos when talking about the secrets of the sea, commenting that "only those who brave its dangers comprehend its mystery."² Espinosa implied that the disorganized nature of Botkin's collection and his controversial statements about folklore were a reflection of scholarly inexperience and should be dismissed. He believed that Botkin did not understand the 'science' of folklore and failed to grasp the 'meaning and values' of that science, as defined by professional folklorists.

Folk-Say was strikingly different from other folklore publications of the period, which makes it easier to understand Espinosa's churlish response. This was a high-spirited compendium, which reflected the new and old, the recent arrival and the seasoned settler. The anthology included an odd

² Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa, "Review of *Folksay: A Regional Miscellany, 1930*," *American Speech* 6, 6 (1931): 449-53.

assortment of tales, descriptions, and reminiscences. Many regions of America were represented, mostly in the West and the South: Kentucky, Texas, Oklahoma, Indiana, California, the Ozark Hills, the Rocky Mountains and the Deep South. The topics were eclectic: the landscape of the southwest, the customs of native American tribes; pioneers' tales harking back to the latter half of the nineteenth century; and tales from diverse occupations (pipeline workers, freight-carriers using carts and mules, threshing crew women). As well as stories, there were songs, dances and riddles. Alongside first-hand accounts of personal experiences, there were scholarly reviews of folklore publications, and essays by folklorists about current 'hot' topics like regionalism, or the representation of the folk in new media such as Hollywood movies.³

In *Folk-Say*, Botkin intentionally included a wider range of folk materials than the conventions of the time prescribed. They were produced by a diverse mixture of Americans and responded to contemporary as well as past events. Botkin also included new writing that reinterpreted folk speech, songs and tales creatively. His editorial approach was innovative and challenged the status quo within the nascent folklore profession. Sterling Brown's poetry, included by Botkin in *Folk-Say* 1930 and subsequent issues, exemplified the direction in which Botkin wanted folklorists to shift, as he creatively used folk materials and paid attention to both the context and the materials themselves in his poetry and critical essays.

This chapter explores how Botkin and Brown, across racial lines, developed similar ideas about folklore and culture in the early 1930s. At this time folklore had a tenuous existence as a fledgling profession and as an adjunct to a number of other disciplines, including literary studies, anthropology and sociology. Folklorists exerted considerable effort to demonstrate that theirs was a serious scholarly endeavor. With their interest in folklore and in the development of a regional approach that used folk materials, Botkin and Brown set out to challenge conservative attitudes to the materials, the tools, and the thinking about folk materials and the folk. They sought to depict a

³ B. A. Botkin, *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany, 1930* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1930).

more inclusive picture of America by widening the definition of folklore to include a broader range of people set in the context in which they lived and worked, which could provoke a debate about race, identity and culture within 1930s America. Their efforts to take a different approach to folklore in the 1930s brought them into conflict with white academic folklorists eager to establish professional credibility and to avoid any mixing of scholarship and activism.

Creating a ‘Direct and Organic Connection with Actual Life’

Botkin and Brown would challenge the prevailing model of folklore in a number of ways. They defined the ‘folk’ more broadly than most folklorists in this period and both believed that folklore could be dynamic and engage with contemporary events, rather than only to collect and classify ‘survivals’ of times past.⁴ They were convinced that folk songs, tales, aphorisms, and other folk materials could be recycled and used creatively in new works of art. It is curious that two young, and, on the surface at least, dissimilar, intellectuals came to develop a common perspective on folklore, literature and culture, a perspective that would be very different to folklorists like Espinosa. Both were born in 1901. Botkin was an American-born Jew of Lithuanian descent, whose father was a Boston shopkeeper; Brown an African-American raised in Washington DC, the middle-class son of a well-respected clergyman. Aside from race, there were other differences between the two young scholars. Botkin’s family moved four times during his childhood (“I never sank my roots in any one of our four home towns”),⁵ whereas Sterling Brown lived on the campus of Howard University throughout his childhood. Brown and Botkin had in common a sharp intelligence that helped them to win scholarships to Harvard University in the early 1920s, where their interest in folklore was nurtured. Botkin achieved a BA at Harvard in 1920, and a Clark Fellowship enabled Brown to study at Harvard for an MA in 1923. At

⁴ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 16-17. In 1871, Edward B. Tylor defined ‘survivals’ as cultural practices surviving into a “a new state of society” where they existed as “proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been involved.”

⁵ Jerrold Hirsch, "Folklore in the Making : B.A. Botkin," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 3-38.

Harvard, both were influenced by the use of the vernacular in poetry by Wordsworth and Carl Sandburgh, and by new nationalistic trends in European literature, which led each to ponder questions about identity and racial stereotyping in literature.⁶

Like many other academics of that era with an interest in folklore, Brown and Botkin started their careers as English teachers - Brown at Howard, a leading African American university, Botkin at the University of Oklahoma. Botkin depicted his decision to move to Oklahoma (where he was based from 1921 to 1935) in a romantic way, to spend “summers of communing with nature,” and having returned to New York for two years’ post-graduate study, he claimed that “the West recalled me.” There is a parallel to Brown’s account of his own ‘calling’ to teach in the South in the 1920s.⁷ As noted in chapter one, Brown’s choice to travel south for a teaching position may have been as much pragmatism as idealism, given the exclusion of black graduates from the faculty in white universities. Similarly, Jewish scholars had great difficulty in securing teaching positions and even by 1940, only two per cent of faculty were Jewish.⁸

Brown and Botkin’s first recorded contact was in 1930 when the fledgling University of Oklahoma Press issued the first two editions of *Folk-Say* under Botkin’s editorship. Botkin included poems by Brown in each issue between 1930 and 1932. Both men would become well known in the 1930s and 1940s: Brown as a poet and critic, Botkin as a professional folklorist, and both would be publicly associated with the literary left. In 1930, however, neither man was particularly well known, and neither had settled on a definite career path. Brown had achieved some success with a selection of poems and literary columns in print, mainly in the monthly *Opportunity, a Journal of Negro Life*. Although Botkin had also written poetry, he was developing formal folklorist skills by 1930, through a study of the Oklahoma play-party. Play

⁶ "My Harvard Accent and 'Indifference': Notes toward the Biography of B. A. Botkin," *Journal of American Folklore* 109, 433 (1996): 308-19; Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 33.

⁷ Hirsch, "My Harvard Accent and 'Indifference': Notes toward the Biography of B. A. Botkin," 10. See chapter one for more detail on Brown’s ‘calling’ to the South.

⁸ Leonard Dinnerstein, "Education and the Advancement of the Jews," in *American Education and the European Immigrant, 1840-1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 52.

parties were a combination of song, dance and games for young people who were not allowed for religious reasons to attend dances. Like Brown, his work had been published in *Opportunity*. During the first years of the 1930s, he produced four *Folk-Say* anthologies and, for a short time in the mid-thirties, a literary magazine called *Space*. Both men were seen as talented and innovative; Brown was expected to deliver great things as a poet of the black folk and Botkin was admired for his efforts in promoting regional and folk literature.

Before considering Botkin and Brown's understanding of the "folk," it is helpful to consider other definitions. In his groundbreaking 1977 study *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*, historian Lawrence Levine used the term 'folk' to mean black Americans generally, from the slavery period to the 1940s. His book was about the "orally transmitted expressive culture of Afro-Americans," so we can infer that he understood 'folklore' as generally transmitted from person to person in speech and song, rather than written down.⁹ In the 1930s, usage of the term was similar to Levine's. African-American sociologist Charles S. Johnson defined the 'folk' as:

a people whose current history is recorded, if at all, by the ethnologist rather than by the historian or the newspaper. Not that folk peoples do not have a history, but it exists for the most part in the form of unrecorded ballads and legends which, with its folk lore, constitutes a tradition that is handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth rather than through the medium of the printed page.¹⁰

Levine's use of 'folk' with the meaning of "people in general" harked back to the original seventeenth century definition of the term. In mid-nineteenth century England, the word 'folk' became more specialised and was combined by W. J. Thoms (founder of the Folk-Lore Society in England) with 'lore' to describe what had previously been called 'popular antiquities' or 'popular literature.' Raymond Williams notes that by the late nineteenth century, 'folklore' was not just an interest in old songs or dances, poetry or stories, customs or beliefs but also centred on the concept of 'survivals.' Often thought

⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness : Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), ix.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, x.

of as material that was transmitted orally, 'folklore' became a reference to the past, to ways of behaving before the acceleration of industrialisation and urbanisation and increasing rates of literacy, and only maintained and sustained in isolated groups or communities. Williams highlights that although "*popular* songs, including new industrial work songs, were still being actively produced," the term 'folk' began to have:

the effect of backdating all elements of popular culture, and was often offered as a contrast with modern popular forms either of a radical and working-class or of a commercial kind.¹¹

In an influential essay in *Folk-Say 1930*, Alexander Haggerty Krappe insisted that folklore was a science and stipulated that it was solely:

the study of 'survivals,' i.e., the sum total of stories, songs, beliefs, and practices which belong to a bygone age and have ceased to have any direct and organic connection with actual life.¹²

Thus the dominant view among folklorists was that it took hundreds of years to bring about the formation of 'folk' traditions and the discipline of examining them could only look to the past.

In his *Folk-Say* anthologies, Botkin decided to break with tradition in a number of ways. Firstly, he would include not just 'survivals' but also contemporary folklore. Secondly, he would include new writing, which made use of folklore creatively rather than providing transcriptions of songs or stories. Thirdly, he would include writing that focused on context, that is the changing world of the 'folk' as well as the content or materials themselves. These changes included the effects of industrialisation and urbanization, discrimination and segregation. His inclusion of Sterling Brown's poem, "Southern Road," exemplifies his intentions.

Brown's poetry was radical in thematic focus but used folklore as the form of delivery. To the rhythm of a worksong, Brown sketched a sparse image of a black convict, imprisoned for life for a fatal shooting, toiling on a chain gang

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1988), x.

¹² Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "'American' Folklore," in *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 127-30.

in the South. Wife, children, father lost to him, and nothing to come but relentless toil, he is shackled at wrist and ankle to a ball and chain and endlessly watched by the “guard behind.” The poem’s last verse sums up the hopelessness of his situation:

White man tells me – hunh
Damn yo’ soul:
White man tells me – hunh
Damn yo’ soul:
Got no need, bebbby,
To be tole.¹³

Within “Southern Road,” Brown created new ‘folk’ poetry with folk materials (in this case, the worksong and black southern dialect) at its heart, and used it to explore a contemporary theme, the forced labor of black convicts under the brutal conditions of the chain gang.

The second Brown poem included by Botkin was about blues singer Ma Rainey and her sustaining effect on black audiences in the South after the devastation caused by the Mississippi floods of 1927. Ma Rainey was not an isolated folksinger, but a commercial blues singer, recording and touring during this period. Brown’s poem conveys the different types of ‘folk’ who travel to see her from farms and lumber camps and “de little river settlements.” She expresses their desperation but also their strength to resist the floods and the destruction of their homes and livelihoods when she sings “Backwater Blues.” Also included was “Dark of the Moon,” which described a black farmer’s son who, drawn to the vitality of the poolrooms and “hussies” of the local town and away from the grinding struggle of the family farm, disappointed his “slow-drawlin’ upstandin’ dad.” Brown’s poems were overtly political. His descriptions of the harsh social and economic situation of black southerners and their vulnerability to poverty, crime, violence, incarceration and natural disasters such as the Mississippi floods were forthright and unflinching.¹⁴

¹³ Sterling A. Brown, “Southern Road,” in *Southern Road: Poems*, ed. Sterling A. Brown (New York: Beacon, 1974), 46-47.

¹⁴ Botkin, *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1930. Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 62, 31.

Brown's poetry surveyed city and country in highlighting racial injustice and paid particular attention to the strength and stoicism demonstrated by black southerners. Although not unique, his celebration of the artistic merit of the language of the black South was unusual. Like Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston (an African American author who had trained in anthropology under Franz Boas in the mid 1920s), Brown used vernacular dialogue and fragments of black folk song within his work. He experimented with blues and worksong forms, as well as exploring themes using motifs from folk tales. What made Brown's work distinctive was the way that he combined these techniques with frank descriptions of aspects of southern life rarely discussed in print at the time, including the taboo topics of segregation and racial oppression.

Brown's poetry, and its inclusion in *Folk-Say*, demonstrates that, as early as 1930, he and Botkin understood that folklore could be used as a dynamic tool that could embrace current affairs. Like more conservative folklorists, they understood that it was important to preserve the 'survivals', the stories, songs and customs that had been passed down orally. More controversially and challenging Krappe's contention that folklore was solely a study of 'survivals,' folklore could be used creatively in new writing that illustrated the contemporary dilemmas and controversial political issues affecting American people. It could in fact create a 'direct and organic connection with actual life'.

'The Fast Vanishing Remains of Folk-Lore'

Folklorists like Stith Thompson, Louise Pound, Aurelio Espinosa, Ralph Boggs and Archer Taylor pored over identical topics as those scrutinized by the American Folklore Society at its establishment over forty years earlier, ignoring current affairs. Instead they concentrated on

the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America, namely relics of Old English Folk-Lore (ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, etc.); lore of Negroes in the Southern States of the Union; lore of the Indian Tribes of North America (myths, tales, etc.); lore of French

Canada, Mexico, etc.¹⁵

Leafing through the pages of *The Journal of American Folklore* or reading the publications produced by some of America's best-known folklorists during the early 1930s provides a stark contrast to *Folk-Say*. Although Americans had experienced the profound shock of the Wall Street Crash and were grappling with the effects of the deepest depression in living memory, folklorists, in the main, took little notice of the turbulent state of the country. They ignored the impact of economic catastrophe and the sweeping changes to patterns of work and ways of living that had taken place over the previous thirty or forty years, brought about by industrialisation and urbanization. These had made themselves felt in daily lives. There had been large-scale movement of poor Southern farmers, especially African Americans, off the land and into the cities during and after the First World War. Immigration from southern and eastern Europe had been curtailed in the late 1920s but the American-born children of the huge numbers of immigrants who had arrived in the first twenty years of the century were highly represented in the cities. Both groups were changing America's culture dramatically.¹⁶

Even a cursory analysis of the *Journal's* articles in 1929 and 1930 provides a good sense of the preoccupations of the more established folklorists of the period. Each issue of the *Journal* tended to be themed. The Spring 1929 edition focused on the Spanish folklore of the Americas. Linguists J. Alden Mason and Aurelio M. Espinosa (whose dismissive review of *Folk-Say* is cited above), published a lengthy article on tales from Puerto Rico accompanied by seven tales collected by Ralph S. Boggs (all were in Spanish).¹⁷ The theme of the Summer 1929 issue was the lore of isolated mountain folk – their dances, games and songs. Both the Ozarks (Vance Randolph) and the Southern Highlands (Archer Taylor, Hannibal and Winnie Duncan, Mellinger E. Henry and others) were featured. Randolph's article was about play parties and described a type of social gathering that was dying out in the Ozarks in

¹⁵ "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore," *Journal of American Folklore* 1, 1 (1888): 3-7.

¹⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 7.

¹⁷ John Alden Mason and Aurelio M. Espinosa, "Porto-Rican Folklore: Folk-Tales," *Journal of American Folklore* 42, 164 (1929): 85-156; Ralph S. Boggs, "Seven Folktales from Porto Rico," *ibid.*: 157-66.

Missouri and Arkansas.¹⁸ Taylor's article compared the English and Scottish versions of a Child Ballad "The Twa Sisters," to assess the origins of the American version of the same song. He concluded that "defective, corrupt and contaminated as the American tradition is," it was nevertheless of "some value in giving information about the English ballad" as the English tradition was "scantily recorded."¹⁹ Both folklorists were interested in description and in tracing origins, and Taylor was preoccupied with demonstrating the scientific nature of his methodology. Anthropologists dominated in the Native American folklore features of the last 1929 and first 1930 issues of the *Journal*, with articles by Elsie Clews Parsons and Ruth Benedict.²⁰ These articles were transcriptions of Zuni and Acoma Pueblo Native American tales published without analysis or commentary.

Although similar in interests and approaches, the folklorists mentioned were in fact following different schools of folklore. Boggs noted: "I have just submitted for publication in *Folklore Fellows Communications*, published in Helsinki, Finland, an index of Spanish folk-tales, based on Thompson's revision of Aarne's Types of the Folktale."²¹ The Finnish approach heavily influenced American folklorists. Julius Krohn and his son Kaarle were the main instigators of this method in the nineteenth century, and its focus was on tracing the origins of folklore texts by making comparisons across time and geographical regions. Krohn's student, Antti Aarne, developed a sophisticated method of classification. In the United States, Stith Thompson, a teacher in the English Department at the University of Indiana, would further develop the approach.

Thompson provides a good example of the striking difference between the *Folk-Say* style and that of other folklore publications of the period. In 1929, he had published a collection of the tales of North American Indians so that within a single volume, readers would have access to "typical examples of such of these tales as have gained any general currency." The sources were

¹⁸ Vance Randolph, "The Ozark Play-Party," *ibid.*, 165: 201-32.

¹⁹ Archer Taylor, "The English, Scottish, and American Versions of the 'Twa Sisters'," *ibid.*: 238-46.

²⁰ Elsie Clews Parsons, "Zuni Tales," *ibid.* 43, 167 (1930); Ruth Benedict, "Eight Stories from Acoma," *Journal of American Folklore* 43, 167 (1930).

²¹ Boggs, "Seven Folktales from Porto Rico," 157-66.

recognized collectors, mainly museums, universities and colleges. Thompson was careful to note that texts were provided without change from the originals, apart from the standardisation, amendment or omission of some Indian spellings, and that any changes made were drawn to the reader's attention. Although he suggested that this work was directed at the general reader, the extensive notes provided were far more compelling to an academic audience.²²

By the time Botkin published *Folk-Say* (1930), Thompson had been toiling on a comprehensive classification of motifs in folk literature for five years. The first of six volumes was published in 1932. The index was vast, the first section alone, which covered only motifs beginning A-C, contained 427 pages. Thompson hoped that the indexing of motifs would mean that "these simple elements ... can form a common basis for a systematic arrangement of the whole body of traditional literature," thereby assisting scholars in gaining access to and understanding the millions of linear miles of folklore materials which had been gathered by the avid fieldworker over the preceding years and deposited in the archives.²³

Archer Taylor was another American folklorist who had been heavily influenced by Krohn and Aarne. Like Thompson, he was interested in tracing the origins and subsequent development of folklore materials over time and as they travelled across regions. Thompson's highly favorable 1929 review of Taylor's *The Black Ox* demonstrates their shared interests and the importance they placed on meticulous research and analysis:

It is by a well-regulated and thorough study of these traits [within a single tale] that the goal of the study is to be reached: a determination of the normal form of the tale, of its general area of origin, of its lines of dissemination, of its changes en route, and (perhaps) of some idea as to its age.²⁴

²² Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1929), vii.

²³ *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature : A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk-Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1932).

²⁴ "Book Review: *The Black Ox: A Study in the History of a Folk-Tale*," *Journal of American Folklore* 43, 167 (1930): 122.

Thompson, Taylor, and Boggs shared a similar literary approach, which looked at written accounts of folktales and sought to validate their age and route of transmission. It was a literary model but its aim, a sort of carbon dating of folktales, strongly conveys the desire of its followers to comply with scholarly conventions and techniques.

An alternative perspective was that of Franz Boas and the anthropologists he trained at Columbia University. A driving force in the American Folklore Society since its inception in 1888, Boas was interested in folklore as one of a selection of powerful tools that the anthropologist could deploy in his study of different races and cultures. He saw folklore as an area of specialisation for the professional anthropologist rather than an independent discipline in itself. Boas attacked the racist thinking that had ranked race and culture in a hierarchy with the white European at its zenith and the African at its base. He directed his efforts at discounting the prevalent notion of a single family tree with cultures evolving from a state of primitivism into a highly sophisticated and advanced condition.²⁵ This was a strong challenge to the idea first posited by Edward Tylor in 1871, that culture was evolutionary. Boas argued instead that any aspect of a culture should be considered in its proper cultural context; it should be seen ‘in the round’ rather than from the perspective of the observer’s culture. He denounced the notion that there existed in any culture a set of absolute standards that could be used to evaluate other cultures and set them on a scale of development. He strove to demonstrate that each culture was different from the next depending on the context in which it had developed. Given that immigrant and African American cultures were considered to be at the primitive end of the evolutionary scale, there is no doubt that Botkin and Brown admired his efforts to challenge the notion of a hierarchy of races, as did many of their contemporaries on the Left in the 1930s.²⁶

Whether adopting a literary or an anthropological approach to folklore, the majority of folklorists held to a common set of values with a premium on the

²⁵ Alexander Lesser and Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture : Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 16-17.

²⁶ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 4-5, 19.

development of and compliance with a robust methodological framework for the profession. It manifested itself in the meticulous scrutiny of texts, lengthy comparative notes, classification systems, careful documentation of sources, traceability in terms of fieldwork and the procedures used in the field, and rigorous professional training within the university setting. Boas's focus was more on the linguistic and ethnographic aspects of anthropology than on the physical, archaeological and natural science tradition within the profession. Nevertheless, his training of anthropologists at Columbia University (including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits) was as stringent as that delivered by Stith Thompson at Indiana University.²⁷

A key rationale behind the adherence of folklorists such as Boggs, Thompson, and Archer to agreed methodological frameworks and rigorous research rules was an attempt to show that the profession was 'scientific,' underpinned by a desire to institutionalise folklore studies within universities. Without academic acceptance, it was difficult for scholars to obtain funding for studies to preserve folklore and extend knowledge of folkways of the past. In fact, the development of professions has been a site of contest and strife rather than a peaceful evolution. Rosemary Zumwalt has captured its flavour:

leaders of nascent disciplines have done battle to establish boundaries, to claim territory, and to chart the direction of the undertaking. The battle has been at times an intellectual blood-letting; at other times, a maneuvering of forces.²⁸

Aiming to institutionalize folklore may have been a reasonable goal for those wishing to bring more resources to their efforts to preserve folklore or to carry out further studies, but it was not an entirely selfless endeavour. Personal recognition and the securing of university appointments were also factors.

As I have demonstrated above, the interests of the majority of American folklorists had changed little from the 1880s to the 1930s. They were preoccupied with collecting and classifying 'survivals' of folklore, as well as in

²⁷ Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas : Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (Amsterdam [u.a.]: Benjamins Publ., 1998), xii.

²⁸ Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship : A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1.

understanding how folklore was transmitted across time and region from Europe. They ignored the context in which folklore was produced (changes in society, the economy, and the political structure) and discounted new iterations of folklore. Although they followed different schools of folklore, they held in common with each other a preoccupation with collection, classification and professional training. Franz Boas and his students were rather different in that they did not see culture as hierarchical, however, they placed an equal emphasis on methodological rigour. Folklorists were part of a profession that was not yet well embedded in the university system, and they were anxious to establish its credibility as an area of scholarly investigation. As I will demonstrate below, the more fluid approach taken by Botkin and Brown challenged the rigid research frameworks they imposed.

Dust on the Folklorists

Botkin invented the term ‘folk-say’ in an attempt to “supplement the older term [folklore] with one possessing wider and fresher connotations.” He wished to remove the ambiguity of the term “folklore,” which meant both the *study* and the *material* (italics mine). Botkin’s intention was to move away from the studious scrutiny of the materials and to stress instead the oral and story-telling features of folklore and “its living as well as its anachronistic phases.”²⁹ It was to include literature about the folk as well as ‘of’ the folk, embracing new and creative uses of folk aphorisms, tale and song.

Botkin’s *Folk-Say* was a deliberate provocation to the institutionalization of folklore studies. Although he completed his professional training in the early 1930s under Louise Pound (a ballad scholar at the University of Nebraska) and demonstrated his ability to produce respected scholarly works, his interests were fast moving away from formal academic research and scholarly

²⁹ B. A. Botkin, ""Folk-Say" and Folklore," *American Speech* 6, 6 (1931): 404-06.

publications.³⁰ *Folk-Say* was his first attempt to build his case for the use of folk materials to meet a different set of objectives.

A key difference between *Folk-Say* and other published folklore was Botkin's aspiration that it relate "the foreground, lore, to its background in life" in what he would later term 'living lore.'³¹ Highly accessible in terms of content and style, the anthologies contained contributions from a wide range of individuals including "old-timers," students, academics, farmers, immigrants and industrial workers. *Folk-Say* could demonstrate the existence of many different American 'folk.' This was a celebration of the direct oral recollections of living people such as pioneer Frank Neff who told minister William Henry tales about the wind's many surprises for him on the prairies of Oklahoma, including the day that the wind blew so hard that the sun stood still all day in the sky.

'Folk-say' went beyond reminiscences and tall tales. Botkin included many different participants and acknowledged the seismic shifts affecting American lives. Unusually, for a folklore collection, industrial workers were present and their lifestyles were represented without gloss. Daniel M. Garrison brought the industrial world to life through his use of the technical terms of the men working on the oil pipeline:

Loop yer goddam tails, cats. Out, jack. If you had twelve more brains you'd have an even dozen. Now loop them tails. Club man, give me a lift. Bar 'er south, bar man.

This instruction to the men told them to use their ropes to roll the pipe, told the "club man" to lift the pipe into place and told the "bar man" to move the crowbar down to hold the joint in position.³²

In publishing the folk-say of a wide range of participants, including the urban as well as the rural, living in a modernizing, industrialising country, Botkin

³⁰ "Folk Speech in the Kentucky Mountain Cycle of Percy Mackaye," *American Speech* 6, 4 (1931): 264-76; *The American Play-Party Song; with a Collection of Oklahoma Texts and Tunes* ([Lincoln]: [The University], 1937).

³¹ "We Call It 'Living Lore'," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1958), <http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic27-3-4/living.html>. Last accessed on 2 March 2010. First published in *New York Folklore Quarterly* 14, 3, (Fall 1958).

³² *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1930, 105.

challenged the notion that folklore was about ‘survivals.’ He aimed to bring the folk to the foreground, as well as the lore; to focus on different American individuals and communities, as well as on the materials they created. He berated folklorists for the narrow views they held in relation to what could and could not be designated as folklore and their fear of modernisation. They also believed that only a class of poor and uneducated people could produce folklore. Francis Child, an influential ballad scholar at Harvard and a founding member of the American Folklore Society, had left behind as his legacy the concept that folklore was to be studied “as the remnants of the unlettered portion of the European literary tradition.”³³ His followers held the view that the unfortunate consequence of extending education more widely to the folk would be the destruction of their folklore. George Kittredge, who educated many folklore enthusiasts in the English Department at Harvard, believed that folk culture could not revitalize the civilised culture; it could only be destroyed by it.³⁴

Botkin’s writing implies that he was impatient with professional folklorists who devoted their careers to studying the folk materials produced by the ‘unlettered’ and yet seemed to have little sympathy for their lives or the folklore they created. In 1944, Botkin would react angrily in print to a dismissive review by John Spargo of George Korson’s *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*. Spargo’s “writing about the coal miners of the United States as if they were performing animals” and his blithe dismissals as “carelessly written versicles” of the songs Korson collected about strikes, accidents and massacres in the mines infuriated Botkin. He admired Korson’s approach to collecting folklore, travelling on “long and arduous journeys” to collect the songs and stories of “a contemporary industrial group” and study them in their “historical, economic, and sociological context,” in contrast to many “desk-based” folklorists studying texts. Botkin denounced the folklore profession:

But it is not only because coal miners' songs are new that folklorists write like this. It is also because folklore is old and tired. There is dust on our fiddles, and it smells not of the collieries but of the libraries. It is time

³³ Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship : A Dialogue of Dissent*, 10.

³⁴ Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk; Folklore and American Literary Theory* ([Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 95.

that folksong scholars stopped thinking of folksong in terms of the English and Scottish ballads. It is time that they did a little more digging in the rock.³⁵

The striving for the institutionalization of folklore brought with it negative constraints and consequences such as the alienation of a wider readership, a shrinking from the realities of the present into a comforting past, a failure to engage with contemporary concerns or to acknowledge the changes taking place in American culture brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation. Botkin and Brown shared the sense that an alternative attitude and approach to folklore was possible and that they would play an active role in shaping it. They defined folk-say as related to the real lives of many different individuals, groups, races and classes. They wrote and edited work that was accessible and that acknowledged the seismic changes in American society.

New Creations of American Lore

By 1930, Botkin was curious as to whether “folk material” could be made into literature “without losing its folk interest and value” and wondered about

the legitimate folk and artistic limitations upon the use, in this literature about the folk, of local allusions and traditions, local color, dialect and the like.³⁶

Brown had been considering similar questions. In his 1927 review of novelist Julia Peterkin’s *Black April*, he explained that she and a range of southern writers might, through the careful treatment of folklore, correct negative racial images in American literature by looking at “the coastal Negro” as “more than a clown; as a human, capable of being a tragic figure, and stirring with his portrait more than ridicule.” Describing Peterkin’s use of charms, curses and cures and folk speech, Brown praised her insight: “she of such entirely different beliefs, speech, rhythm.” Brown saw Peterkin as one of a new breed of Southern writers who wrote about African American southerners and their culture as human and “not as ‘bois d’ebene’ of the old

³⁵ B. A. Botkin, “Dust on the Folklorists,” *Journal of American Folklore* 57, 224 (1944): 139.

³⁶ *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1930, 18.

slave trade,” and could see beneath the system of racial beliefs and traditions in the South, “the same human fundamentals; that beside cruelty, bestiality, ignorance there may be tenderness, shrewdness, fortitude.”³⁷

Both Brown and Botkin celebrated the use of dialect and reworking of traditional stories in poetry and prose rather than believing it should be collected and published in ‘pure’ and unadulterated form. Their shared commitment to “folklore as literature rather than folklore as science,” led them to adopt a tolerant approach to the creative use of folklore in literature. Politically, however, Brown and Botkin were worlds apart from a southern conservative such as Peterkin and they were critical when writers married the use of folk materials with an espousal of a conservative political agenda that glorified a pastoral perspective. As Peterkin’s portraits edged away from the everyday reality of black life in the South, Brown voiced concern about her increasing “fondness for the startling, the bizarre, the primitive” in *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928) and *Bright Skin* (1932). In 1927’s *Black April*, Peterkin had used “folk-beliefs and ways” to depict “Negroes as characters and not as background types.” In 1933, Peterkin collaborated with photographer Doris Ulmann in a book called *Roll Jordan Roll*, which described the lives of ex-slaves and their descendants on Peterkin’s plantation in the Gullah coastal region of South Carolina. Brown denounced her for painting a false picture of “Arcadian simplicity and happiness” and her avoidance of “poverty, ignorance, disease and exploitation.”³⁸

He praised another author who depicted folk customs and speech, Du Bose Heyward, and his “willingness to see the Negro as heroic” in *Mamba’s Daughters* even when she or he was of low social standing.³⁹ Although it was thirty years since the peak of success for authors such as Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon who had glorified the paternalistic society of the antebellum South in what Brown called the ‘plantation tradition,’ stereotyped

³⁷ Sterling A. Brown, “The New Secession - a Review,” *Opportunity* 5, 5 (1927): 147-48.

³⁸ “The Literary Scene – Chronicle and Comment: Local Color or Interpretation,” 223; *The Negro in American Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937), 120.

³⁹ *The Negro in American Fiction*, 119.

descriptions of black southerners were still commonplace.⁴⁰ Writers of their ilk had ignored the “travesty of justice” of a Southern system that could sentence a woman to seven year’s jail for stealing some old clothes; the shocking conditions of labour in the phosphate mines; and the way that African Americans could be terrorized and murdered in parts of the South without consequence. Heyward in contrast brought them to the fore.⁴¹ Du Bose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, E. C. L. Adams, Howard W. Odum; all were putting folk speech and folkways into play within their writing, either as its central feature or to add vitality and ‘flavour’ to their work. Sociologist Guy B. Johnson’s essay in *Folk-Say 1930* testifies to this.⁴² Although watchful for stereotyping and falsely pastoral narratives, critics like Brown saw the realist fiction of these southern writers as significantly different from the earlier ‘plantation tradition.’

Brown and Botkin’s interest in using folklore creatively was not prompted by a romanticised yearning for the past. They looked at how folksong, for example, related to contemporary events, at how the blues “responded to historical oppression and the conditions of industrial work.”⁴³ Brown pointed out the range of topics covered by the blues. There was the chaos caused by natural disasters like flooding and cyclones:

The wind was howlin’, buildin’s begin to fall
I seen dat mean ol’ twister comin’ jes lak a cannon ball.

Farming and cotton, sickness and death, Prohibition, the birds and animals of the rural South, black superstitions and proverbs, poverty, prison and the chain gang – all were legitimate topics within the blues. This was folk drama and tale for the purposes of social criticism and bringing about social justice, not a wistful nostalgia for good ole’ slavery times down on the plantation. Their attraction to forms which lent themselves to contemporary social commentary and an acknowledgement of power imbalances distinguished their work from that of the majority of folklorists at the time. Throughout the

⁴⁰ See discussion of Brown’s analysis of stereotypes in “Negro character as seen by white authors” in chapter one. The ‘plantation tradition’ is also discussed below under “The New Regionalism.”

⁴¹ Sterling A. Brown, “Our Book Shelf – Mamba’s Daughters,” *Opportunity* 7, 5 (1929): 161-62.

⁴² Guy B. Johnson, “Folk Values in Recent Literature on the Negro,” in *Folk-Say 1930*, ed. B. A. Botkin (1930), 359.

⁴³ B. A. Botkin, “Self-Portraiture and Social Criticism in Negro Folk Song,” *Opportunity* 5 (1927): 38-42.

1930s, Sterling Brown would deploy folk material in his writings and comment on its use in literature by others whilst Botkin urged folklorists and writers to think about how they could use folklore differently and creatively. Both were focused on the use of folklore to draw attention to social conflict and injustice.

The inclusion of black folk forms, such as the blues, was significant in another way. Arguments were ongoing about what could be defined as American folklore and what had been imported or hybridized from Europe. This had become a highly contentious issue, not only in American folklore studies but also in debates about American culture generally. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, Child's view, that the English ballad was an authentic and superior folksong and that all American ballads were debased descendants of the pure European forms, went largely unchallenged. Most folklore scholars concluded that there was no such thing as an original form of American folksong. Krappe in *Folk-Say* 1930 had reiterated the view commonly held by folklorists at the time; there was no such thing as American folklore, "only European (or African, or Far Eastern) folklore on the American continent, for the excellent reason that there is no American 'folk.'"⁴⁴ Botkin argued for a different perspective; an acceptance of the denotation of 'American' as

that which is found in America, *in spite* of its European connection and *because* of its language, literature, or even citizenry.⁴⁵

In refusing the hierarchical relationship with Europe and in embracing black folk forms within *Folk-Say*, Botkin anticipated the work of John and Alan Lomax's *American Ballads and Folksongs* (1934) in which they would reject the notion that versions of European ballads were the only folksongs in America and highlight the importance of African American folksong in the development of a native American folk tradition.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Krappe, "'American' Folklore," 291.

⁴⁵ Botkin, *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1930, 16.

⁴⁶ Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk; Folklore and American Literary Theory*, 103.

In Botkin's view, the participation of many different sorts of Americans in producing multiple types of folk literature and song was central to a vibrant American culture. He pressed for an appreciation of the assortment of groups (whether regional, racial or occupational) that "have undergone changes that make them a new creation, worthy of study and collection." Botkin encouraged folklorists to embrace the variety of American folk and cultures which, "while it may stand in the way of the synthesis beloved of the scholar, constitutes the strength and richness of American lore."⁴⁷ This linked to what Alfred Haworth Jones (drawing on critic Van Wyck Brook's famous article in *The Dial* in 1918) called the "search for a usable American past." Jones described how the economic crisis

led to an accentuation of the most encompassing aspects of the American heritage: the occupations and amusements of the many rather than the manners of the few, the log cabin in the clearing rather than the plantation mansion by the river.⁴⁸

The *Folk-Say* anthologies were produced as the shock of the Depression jolted Americans and they became interested in a past and a present that could acknowledge and embrace the experiences of many types of American people.

Through creative and imaginative uses and recycling of folk materials rather than focusing only on careful preservation, folklore could also help to create a body of American literature. This explains Botkin's encouragement of poets like Brown who were engaging with folk materials creatively. When subsequently published in book form, the poems by Brown that Botkin included in *Folk-Say* 1930 and 1931 would be widely celebrated for their fusion of folk materials and contemporary issues.⁴⁹ Zora Neale Hurston was experimenting in a similar way to Brown. Like him, she had spent much of the second half of the 1920s in the South, where she collected material that would eventually appear in 1935 as *Mules and Men*, a collection of Florida

⁴⁷ Botkin, *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1930, 16.

⁴⁸ Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23, 5 (1971): 710-12.

⁴⁹ Brown, "Southern Road."; William Rose Benet, "A New Negro Poet," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, May 14, 1932, 732; "A Notable New Book of Negro Poetry," *New York Times Book Review*, 15 May 1932, 13; "Review of *Southern Road*," *The Nation*: 43; "Review of *Southern Road*," *The New Republic*: 297; Louis Untermeyer, "New Light from an Old Mine," *Opportunity* (1932): 250; Locke, "Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk-Poet," 111.

folklore.⁵⁰ Where Brown absorbed the “speech patterns, lore, legends, myths, and manners of the country folk” he met whilst teaching in Lynchburg, Nashville and Missouri and used those to inform his poetic voice,⁵¹ Hurston would use folk materials to inform her novels and plays, most notably in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The dialect of black southerners had been deliberately cast aside by some middle-class African Americans, who associated it with the material and intellectual deprivation forced upon black Southerners by the segregated society in which they had lived. Brown and Hurston, in particular, liberated dialect to powerful effect in a vivid celebration of the black vernacular.

While Botkin pushed for a new application of folklore to enliven literature, Brown was delivering this in his poetry and weighing up the successes and failures of other American writers in their attempts to do the same. Brown and Botkin did not necessarily see white southern realists’ efforts to incorporate folklore within their writing as reactionary retreats into a grand southern past. They considered each attempt on its own merits. In their own work, they celebrated the facility of folk forms to address contemporary issues rather than to romanticise the past. Valuing folk materials as expressions of a developing indigenous American culture, they considered that it would be a diverse and heterogenous culture.

Folk Culture, Mass Culture

Crucially, folk materials were not, by Brown and Botkin’s definition, solely pre-industrial and outside of the fast-growing mass culture industries. In this period at least, Botkin and Brown saw mass culture and a potential mass audience as an invigorating opportunity as much as a threat to folk culture. This led them to investigate new media whilst other folklorists were studying written texts. Hence, Botkin’s interest in the 1920s phenomena of “Lizzie Labels,” the comic signs painted (often by university students) on Model T

⁵⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

⁵¹ Houston A. Baker, “Sterling’s Magic - Sterling Brown,” *Black Issues Books Review* (2001): 32.

Fords and his careful classification of 1,564 “Lizzie Labels.”⁵² Botkin was unorthodox in this period in his lobbying for the appreciation of oral culture in conjunction with his fascination with the interface between older forms of folk culture and modern popular culture. He was interested in the impact that contact with other communities and racial groups might have on traditional cultures and how they might evolve in the face of economic crisis, industrialization, and migration.⁵³

As noted above, Brown’s poem “Ma Rainey” in the 1930 edition of *Folk-Say* celebrated the power of a commercial blues singer to communicate with, empathise with and comfort her audience of country people:

O Ma Rainey
Li'l an' low;
Sing us 'bout de hard luck
Roun' our do';
Sing us 'bout de lonesome road
We mus' go...⁵⁴

In the early 1970s, Jean Wagner would portray Brown as a poet of the dusty roads of the South, “hostile to the rowdy atmosphere of the city, where popular traditions are commercialized and prostituted.”⁵⁵ Certainly, although Brown celebrated Ma Rainey, his 1930 essay on the blues in the same volume demonstrated some ambivalence about mass production and commercialisation. Rather than a man refusing to acknowledge or embrace change, we picture someone grappling to understand its potential consequences. Brown did regret the fact that “it is becoming more and more difficult to tell which songs are truly folk” as blues became increasingly commercialized and appeared on Broadway, on phonograph records, and on the vaudeville circuit, but he also noted that record companies

seem willing to record the crudest and most naïve Blues, from most obvious folk sources. Artless cottonfield calls and levee moans are quite as likely to be found as urbanized fake folk things.

⁵² B. A. Botkin, “The Lore of the Lizzie Label,” *American Speech* 6, 2 (1930): 81-93; “An Anthology of Lizzie Labels,” *American Speech* 7, 1 (1931): 32-39.

⁵³ *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1929 (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1929).

⁵⁴ Sterling A. Brown, “Ma Rainey,” in *Folk-Say, a Regional Miscellany*, 1930, ed. B. A. Botkin (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1930). Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 62-63.

⁵⁵ Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, 477.

Brown felt that the singers appearing on phonograph records, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Cottonfield Thomas, were mostly “of the folk, earthy and genuine.” He noted in the commercial Blues, “traces of the same folk imagery and attitude found in the earliest noted examples.”⁵⁶

Although similar to Brown in her interest in folklore, the folkways of the South and black dialect, Zora Neale Hurston struggled more to accept that the changes brought about by migration and the increasingly urban black population could bring positive benefits to black culture. In 1937, novelist Richard Wright penned a contemptuous review in the left-wing journal *New Masses*, in which he accused Hurston of using

the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.⁵⁷

Sixty years later, Hazel Carby reiterated Wright’s criticism, that Hurston was avoiding confrontation with societal change and class conflict. Carby claimed that Hurston’s incursions into her hometown of Eatonville and other parts of her home state of Florida to collect folklore were an attempt to build “a utopian reconstruction of her childhood” because she was trying to “displace the social contradictions and disruption of her contemporary moment,”⁵⁸ in other words, to ignore the mass migrations of black southerners to the cities.

Unlike Hurston, Brown and Botkin were not pining for the past; their thinking was that folklore could go hand-in-hand with an agitation for social change and its proponents did not have to maintain a position of detachment from injustice. During the 1930s and beyond, Botkin and Brown rejected the notion that intellectuals studying folklore must be politically neutral, without discarding their objective of reflecting as accurately as possible the voices and views of many Americans. This started with the *Folk-Say* anthologies but is

⁵⁶ Sterling A. Brown, "The Blues as Folk Poetry," in *Folk-Say; a Regional Miscellany; 1930*, ed. B.A. Botkin (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1930), 324-25.

⁵⁷ Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses* 25 (1937): 22, 25.

⁵⁸ Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally (New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1994), 30-44, 31.

also exemplified in Brown's poetry. This was an inclusive approach to a changing and industrializing society, and an approach that sought to understand rather than to fear mass culture. The eclectic jumble of contributors to *Folk-Say* included those who were apolitical or conservative but Botkin also included those who had visited the Soviet Union, were in trade unions, were teachers at labour colleges or wrote for left-wing publications like *New Masses*.⁵⁹ Botkin and Brown also considered new media such as bumper stickers and phonograph records as folk materials, worthy of study. They were interested in how changes in society, the economy, work, migration and protest were expressed through folklore. They sought to understand how commercialization and mass culture would affect folklore.

The Worker-Writers

Many of the writers with whom Botkin and Brown shared similar interests in this period and who were publishing in the left wing magazines such as *New Masses* could be called worker-writers. The commercialisation of popular culture and changes in the way cultural materials were produced in film, radio, jukeboxes, records, newspapers and advertising meant that working class people were not only a powerful audience but a strong presence as producers of cultural materials.⁶⁰ Both Brown and Botkin came into contact with the Rebel Poets, a loose network of left-wing writers with a shared interest in regional folklore and literature. Brown's contact was through his friendships with Botkin and with historian Kenneth Porter, whom he met at Harvard in 1931. Brown, Botkin, George Korson (whose book about mining is discussed above) and Rebel Poets Jack Conroy and Norman Macleod became interested in what they called occupational folklore, which demonstrated workers' experiences as well as the new forms of folklore they were creating.⁶¹ Botkin included Macleod in *Folk-Say*. He was the editor of a regional magazine called *The Morada* and had held a diverse collection of jobs himself.

⁵⁹ Susan G. Davis, "Ben Botkin's FBI File," *Journal of American Folklore* 123, 487 (2009): 13.

⁶⁰ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 83-95.

⁶¹ Charlie T. McCormick and Kim Kennedy White, *Folklore an Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 919.

He was described in *Folk-Say* 1932 as having been a

hobo, lumber scaler [measurer of thickness and grade of wood], convertible puncher in the smelters in Douglas, Arizona, park ranger and rock checker in Glacier National Park, sheep hand, cattle herder, clerk in a hardware store, teamster, instructor in freshman English at the University of New Mexico, custodian of the Petrified Forest National Monument in Arizona...⁶²

Jack Conroy was another worker-writer, constantly on the move to keep his family fed and clothed, from a shoe factory in Hannibal, Missouri to an automobile factory in Toledo, Ohio. After long days of physical toil, Conroy wrote in the evenings to satisfy his creative and political aspirations. He was instrumental in ensuring the publication of the Rebel Poets' annual anthologies *Unrest* (1929-1932) and subsequently set up a radical regional magazine called *The Anvil*.⁶³

Botkin and Brown both had university positions in the early 1930s and therefore their financial situations were more secure than those of a worker-writer like Conroy. However, like the worker writers and the central figures in Denning's panoramic survey of the 'Cultural Front,' they were anti-lynching, pro-civil rights and pro-labour.⁶⁴ Brown's search for a publisher from the mid 1930s for his second collection of poetry *No Hiding Place* was a failure. The official reason given was financial viability. Harcourt Brace rejected the book in September 1938. Donald B. Elder at Doubleday Doran wrote to Brown in 1939: "we simply can't sell volumes of verse, no matter how excellent...."⁶⁵ Alan Calmer's offer to place Brown's "unpublished revolutionary poems" under a pseudonym in *Partisan Review* is telling in terms of suggesting that the radicalism of the poetry was another reason for its rejection.⁶⁶ In an interview with William R. Ferris many years later, Brown described the poems of *No Hiding Place* including "Side by Side" and "Colloquy" as from his "very left wing period."⁶⁷ The poems Botkin would publish in *Folk-Say* 1932

⁶² B. A. Botkin, *Folk-Say IV, The Land Is Ours* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), 296-97.

⁶³ Douglas C. Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 301-03.

⁶⁴ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 7-14.

⁶⁵ Donald B. Elder to Sterling A. Brown, 3 Mar 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 6, Folder E.

⁶⁶ Alan Calmer to Sterling A. Brown, 5 Aug 1935, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC. Calmer was one of the editors of *Partisan Review* in the 1930s and associated with the CPUSA's John Reed clubs.

⁶⁷ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

included "A Bad, Bad Man," about a "squincy runt/ four foot two" named John Bias who saved his friend from a lynching:

The crackers spoke, from then on
Of the giant nigger,
Every day he grew a
Little bigger.⁶⁸

His poetic descriptions of the way capitalists exploited southern workers, black and white, and pitted them against each other foreshadowed the themes of other critics of the southern racial order, W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941) and Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* (1949).

Botkin, Conroy and Brown were involved with the American Writer's Congress. In 1935, the Communist Party of America (CPUSA) called a national meeting with the aim of uniting those on the Left as a Popular Front to challenge capitalism and the rise of fascism. It signaled a major change in policy for the CPUSA, away from denouncing non-Party members as the bourgeoisie and towards a unity of liberals, socialists and communists. *New Masses* published a Call for the American Writers' Congress to establish a League of American Writers to

Fight against imperialist war and fascism; defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression; for the development and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement; against white chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution) and against the persecution of minority groups and of the foreign-born; solidarity with colonial people in their struggles for freedom; against the influence of bourgeois ideas in American liberalism; against the imprisonment of revolutionary writers and artists, as well as other class-war prisoners throughout the world.⁶⁹

Sixty four writers signed 'The Call to Congress,'⁷⁰ and African American signatories included Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, Eugene Gordon and Langston Hughes. More than 4,000 writers and would-be writers gathered for the Congress on Labor Day, May 1st, 1935. The Congresses and the

⁶⁸ Brown, "A Bad, Bad Man." Reprinted in Brown and Harper, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 144-45.

⁶⁹ "Call for an American Writers' Congress," *New Masses* (1935): 20.

⁷⁰ These included Nelson Algren, Kenneth Burke, Erskine Caldwell, Alan Calmer, Robert Cantwell, Jack Conroy, Malcolm Cowley, Theodore Dreiser, Waldo Frank, Michael Gold, Granville Hicks, Tillie Lerner, Meridel Le Sueur, Grace Lumpkin, Harold Preece, and Lincoln Steffens.

organisation emanating from them, the League of American Writers (LAW), would bring together some of America's best known and most talented writers. At its peak, LAW had over eight hundred members.

Jack Conroy spoke at the first Congress about what worker-writers were trying to achieve and the commonality with Botkin and Brown is clear:

...we have something vital and new to communicate. Our first duty is to attempt an interpretation of those aspects of American life important to the masses, and the next duty is to communicate this material as simply and clearly as we are able to the largest body of readers we can command.⁷¹

Just as Brown and Botkin incorporated folk materials that described the harsh realities of farming and fighting the boll weevil, poverty, and natural disasters, Conroy wrote about the experiences of factory workers, people living in small towns and cities, struggling with long shifts and dangerous conditions on the production lines and with the threat of layoffs, evictions and starvation.

Botkin and Brown saw that folk materials adapted to the changes within the society that produced them and could convey the realities of industrial life as aptly as the isolated rural communities that had preceded it. Indeed, they saw folklore as a means of publicising the inequalities that accompanied industrialisation, just as much as the exploitation under slavery or the prejudices of the segregated South. In their approach and their political outlook, they had much in common with the worker-writers. With the establishment of the American Writers' Congress, those shared aims were made more explicit: they wanted to interpret the lives of ordinary 'folk' and reach as wide an audience as possible.

⁷¹ Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America*, 170. As set out in chapter one, this was also a key objective for Brown and his Howard allies, Harris, Frazier and Bunche in this decade and a major challenge for them given the constraints of racial segregation.

The New Regionalism

Writers focusing on the South, the Southwest and the Midwest were often grouped together under the banner of Regionalism. This was a term that Botkin himself favoured and attempted to define. Aware that mass production and the nationalisation of cultural production might mean the diversity of what was produced was flattened out and lost, Botkin felt that New Regionalism had much to offer literature in subject matter and technique. He considered that local dialects, customs and landscape, symbols and imagery, expressions, style and rhythm of speech, songs and stories had value. He also believed in the social and political worth of regionalism which offered literature “a point of view (the social ideal of a planned society and the cultural values derived from tradition as “the liberator, not the confiner”). In other words, he felt that information gathered from a particular region could be used to help the larger society to understand the needs, ways and values of that region’s people and to help it develop. As Botkin saw it, the personality and actions of each person were “linked to the society in which they take place” and “the geographical context” was also relevant.⁷²

At the second American Writers’ Congress in 1937, many of the speakers focused on fascism in Europe and the war in Spain. Botkin instead contemplated the writer’s role at home in America in a paper entitled “Regionalism and Culture.”⁷³ Botkin’s view of the potential functions of a regional literature sound remarkably similar to the aims Conroy had set out in 1935 for worker writers:

It can give first-hand data on the people and on their living and working conditions. It can help make the masses articulate by letting them tell their own story, in their own words.

But he went further in his description:

And it does not simply provide source material - it can create new forms, styles, and modes of literature by drawing upon place, work,

⁷² B. A. Botkin, "Regionalism: Cult or Culture?," *English Journal* 25, 3 (1936): 181-85.

⁷³ "Regionalism and Culture," in *The Writer in a Changing World*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1937), 140-57.

and folk for motifs, images, symbols, slogans, and idioms. And more than a mold of literature it can serve as an organizer as well as an interpreter of social thought, assisting integration and re-orientation by helping us to understand and respect one another, and by showing the failure and breakdown of old patterns and the growth of and hope for new ones.

Botkin believed that regional literature could be “truly cultural, not only as a conserver but as a selector and integrator of cultural values” and could encourage “a sense of basic human relationships.”⁷⁴ In other words, he believed that regional literature could promote understanding, tolerance and integration across different ethnic groups.

Regionalism was not new. In literature, the interest in regionalism had risen to a peak in the late nineteenth century with a trend in writing often referred to as ‘local color.’ Regional writers captured the local language, attitudes, customs and ways of living in their state, city, town, or village. George Washington Cable’s evocative descriptions of New Orleans are an example, as are Bret Harte’s lively stories of the gold rush camps of California. Within the regional literature about the South, Thomas Nelson Page was one of the most popular and durable authors to portray the plantation life of past glory days now extinct. His *In Ole Virginia* (1887) was typical. He depicted three elderly black southerners (or “ventriloquist’s dummies” as Sterling Brown called them) agreeing upon the “blessedness of slavery:”

Dem wuz good ole times, marster – de bes’ Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac’! Niggers didn’t hed nothing’ ‘tall to do.... Dyar warn’t no trouble nor nothin’.⁷⁵

In the writing of Page and others of his ilk, regionalism was as much about a specific point in time as it was about the particular region. A deep familiarity with the language and customs was used to glean sympathy for a particular political position, a deeply conservative stance in relation to black and white social and economic relations.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, 51.

Thirty to forty years after the publication of Page's *In Ole Virginia*, the 'plantation tradition,' as this subset of "local color" was known, was still going strong. However, by the twenties, a different type of regionalism became increasingly popular in poetry and fiction. Americans were fascinated by Sherwood Anderson's short stories about the inhabitants of the small town of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). They enjoyed the gentle satire of Sinclair Lewis's account of the fictional Gopher Prairie, Minnesota in *Main Street* (1920), which sold 180,000 copies in the first half of 1921. Zona Gale, who chose to stay in her hometown of Portage, Wisconsin from 1912 until her death in 1938, was also concerned with the unique character of her region. Her adaptation of her novel *Miss Lulu Bett* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921. There was an appetite for stories about local people and an interest in their behaviour, values and day-to-day lives and how changes in the nation as a whole, for example, in economics or the status of women or internal migration, affected them. This was a regionalism that went beyond promoting the aims of a particular section of the country to writing that, although grounded in a particular region, spoke to themes of interest to the nation as a whole. Regionalism had also gained a high profile in poetry with Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost's poetry of New England; Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915); and Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* (1916). Each of these had strongly influenced Brown and Botkin in their years at Harvard. Novels like Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) took a precise geographical setting as a backdrop for stories that highlighted the inequality and brutality of the southern regime.

After the publication of *Folk-Say* 1929, a young lawyer and writer, Carey McWilliams, criticised the way in which Botkin and those he published desired to escape from the "tumultuous present" of the modern world into a comforting past, enthusiastically collecting the "songs of hoboes, lumberjacks, cowboys, and miners" whilst ignoring the "proletarian heroes of the modern age." Although far to the left of Espinosa in his views about literature and folklore, McWilliams had similarly struggled to understand Botkin's rationale for *Folk-Say*'s contents:

In times so strenuous as ours, it is rather annoying to discover intelligent men devoting their talents to such tasks as listing the animals and plants in Oklahoma folk-cures and noting, with infantile delight, the eroticisms in the folk-speech of taxi-drivers.⁷⁶

An appraisal of all four issues of *Folk-Say* indicates a different overall drive by Botkin. His definition of regionalism paid attention to race, class, sometimes gender, conflict, history, labour and poverty.⁷⁷

In fact, much of Botkin's speech at the Second American Writers' Congress was taken up with a critique of an older tradition of regionalism but one that was in resurgence in the early to mid 1930s, epitomized in the work of folklorist Mary Austin in the Southwest and the Southern Agrarians, who were a group of conservative literary scholars based in Nashville, Tennessee, including Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson and Stark Young. Botkin applauded Austin's leadership of Southwestern writers and artists in their attempts to resist the "forcible assimilation of the Indian" and to "the improvement of the Indian's economic status and the enhancement of his social prestige." She also promoted recognition of both Indian and Spanish-Colonial folk arts and traditions. However, he pointed out that she "knew the culture of the Indians and their Spanish conquerors ... better than she knew the industrial civilization that had conquered both" and that her fear of modernisation led her to retreat into the past.

Botkin's critique of the Southern Agrarians found them longing for a "good and easy life." The Agrarians had set out their views in *I'll Take My Stand, by Twelve Southerners*, published in 1930. This was ostensibly a plea to the younger southerner to abandon the "industrial gospel" and "come back to the support of the Southern tradition." The authors bemoaned the fate of many sections of the country "groaning under industrialism" and urged their countrymen to "throw it off."⁷⁸ Unlike Botkin, they concluded that:

⁷⁶ Carey McWilliams, *The New Regionalism in American Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Book store, 1930), 23-24.

⁷⁷ Davis, "Ben Botkin's FBI File," 15.

⁷⁸ *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand; the South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), x.

neither the creation nor the understanding of works of art is possible in an industrial age except by some local and unlikely suspension of the industrial.⁷⁹

The rustic image depicted by the Agrarians was of a single pioneer labourer or family toiling on a small farm, suffering the challenges brought by changing soil or weather conditions but equally enjoying the honest fruits of their labour. It was a description of a type of labour that was untypical of the South as a whole and, although its dreamy descriptions could have referred to 1930 or 1830, it omitted the slave, the renter and the sharecropper. The southerners who took on a heavy annual debt in order to provide basic food and clothing for their families whilst they eked out a living on inadequate and unfertile soil may not have recognised the “perfect economic security” they enjoyed. The “agrarian society” in which “agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige – a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure...” was an artificial construct, a fantasy beyond nostalgia.⁸⁰

Through a doctrine of white supremacy, the Agrarians, according to Botkin, solved race and class problems in a simple fashion, by ignoring the proletariat and black southerners. The nine million blacks who made up nearly twenty five per cent of the South’s population figured little. Their experiences, without equal protection under the law, lacking voting rights and experiencing the daily deprivations of segregation which prevented their access to public facilities including toilets, water, transport, education and medical care were not considered. To the Agrarians, the South consisted of White Anglo Saxon Protestant landowners. The vocational training available at Tuskegee and Hampton was paternalistically applauded as these institutions were “adapted to the capacity of that race and produce far healthier and happier specimens of it than all the institutions for ‘higher learning’ than we can ever give them.”⁸¹ Robert Penn Warren’s “The Briar Patch,” the only essay out of the twelve to discuss the situation of African

⁷⁹ Ibid., xv.

⁸⁰ Ibid., ix-xx.

⁸¹ John Gould Fletcher, “Education, Past and Present,” in *I’ll Take My Stand; the South and the Agrarian Tradition*, ed. Twelve Southerners (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), 121.

Americans in any detail was a paean to segregation, to “let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree.”⁸²

Industrial capitalism had been discredited by the crash of 1929 and the Nashville Agrarians were not its only vociferous critics. Liberals and left-wing radicals were invested with a renewed vigour in their search for alternatives ways to improve society. The interest in studying specific geographical areas within the United States was not confined to literature but extended to history, anthropology and sociology. It was not just about local expressions, customs, and use of language but was also about data collection and analysis on a massive scale. At the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, the regionalism of sociologist Howard W. Odum emphasised an objective empirical study of the separate regions of the South – their agriculture, their ecology and the relationships between the people and the geography of the different regions of the continent.

Odum’s *Southern Regions of the United States* (1936) was a highly influential inventory of multiple measures of the country’s progress in different regions. Population, size of farms, number of farms operated by tenants and sharecroppers, the number of automobiles on farms, rainfall, soil erosion, expenditure on public libraries, per capita expenditure for appliances and radios, sales at sporting good stores are just some examples of the reams of data and comparisons included. Odum and his students processed statistics about multiple aspects of life in the various regions to illuminate differences in health, education, and the state of the economy, agriculture and industry. The regionalists at Chapel Hill changed American’s perspective on the South through the power of their statistical analyses and demonstrated the stranglehold that a single crop - cotton - exerted on the region. They exposed the lie in the arguments of the Nashville Agrarians that there was progress in train for the poor farmers of the South. The “enjoyment of labour” was nowhere to be seen in their stark depiction of a region stripped of investment, lacking basic infrastructure and cowering under a pervasive poverty.

⁸² Robert Penn Warren, "The Briar Patch," *ibid.*, 247.

Odum believed that when taken together the studies he and his colleagues produced would contribute not only to a deeper understanding of individual regions but to a sharper picture of the whole South and indeed the American nation in its entirety. In Odum's view, regionalism was a tool that could be used by political scientists, geographers, anthropologists, creative writers, government officials, policy makers and planners. As their confidence grew, the Chapel Hill Regionalists believed that their approach could evolve beyond a methodology for the careful gathering and analysis of facts into a scientific tool for planning a more successful society, not just in the South but across the nation. Historian Daniel T. Rodgers says that Odum changed how the South was perceived within the United States, particularly through his use of maps, which made a strong visual impact within his study. The national perspective on the South had previously given North Carolina pride of place with "its central, textile-mill-lined axis" which ran "straight and quickly to places like Atlanta and Birmingham that bustled with similar energy."⁸³ Chapel Hill regionalists drew attention instead to the cotton fields of the rural South of Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi. Certainly *Southern Regions* became the reference book used by journalists and writers like Jonathan Daniels of the *Raleigh News and Observer* (see chapter five). For the first time, they could link their impressions of the South with a substantial body of comparative data about southern living conditions.

It seems peculiar that within *Southern Regions*, Odum, seen as a liberal, avoided writing about race as much as did the ultra conservative Nashville Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand*. Odum had been interested in African-American folksongs since graduate school. Rodgers described his *The Negro and his Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926) as a mixture of "early fragments of cultural anthropology with the literary cult of the primitive then in vogue" which meant his books

veered back and forth between romantic evocation of the spirit of the black folk and the social-scientific language of family and social

⁸³ Daniel T. Rodgers, "Regionalism and the Burdens of Progress," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction : Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. C. Vann Woodward, J. Morgan Kousser, and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 7.

disorganization that came more properly to a professor of sociology and social work.⁸⁴

The internal conflict between a romanticisation of black folklore and a desire to study it dispassionately did not cause his interest to flag, however, and he tasked Thomas Woofter, Guy and Guion Johnson with investigating black folk life on the St Helena Sea Island in South Carolina in the late 1920s. Within *Southern Regions*, however, race and class were studiously ignored.

Whilst Rodgers argued that Odum treated data without consideration of the impact of race and hence the Chapel Hill regionalists ignored “those facts that others were beginning to see as central to understanding the South,” he admitted that their motivation may have been political; if they had segregated their data by race, they would have opened up their conclusions to the interpretation that there was nothing wrong with the South “that could not be explained by the downward drag of its Negro population.” By ignoring race, they could instead emphasis the extent and impact of poverty, which was what mattered most to them.⁸⁵

Regionalism was a concept that Botkin and Brown believed could contribute to literature, but could also provide a useful perspective on society and politics. Gathering and analysing information from a particular region would help society to plan to meet the needs of the area but also to appreciate its value to the larger society. Regionalism gave Botkin and Brown the opportunity to showcase the diversity within a region and to show that the national character developed out of the experiences of many different types of Americans. In literature, Botkin and Brown differentiated between New Regionalism and late nineteenth century traditions of ‘local color,’ which tended to be nostalgic for a idealized antebellum past. As noted above, the 1920s brought a new type of regionalism in literature into the imagination of a national audience in a genre that expressed realistic themes and documented changes in life due to migration and industrialisation. Although *Folk-Say* included some segments that could be called ‘local color’ (as criticised by

⁸⁴ Ibid., 15-16.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 9-10.

McWilliams), on the whole it brought realistic themes and radical concerns into the study and dissemination of folklore. The Nashville Agrarians were literary regionalists but they held a conservative agenda in relation to race and were vehemently opposed to the reality of the industrialised South. In North Carolina, Odum's use of regionalism within sociological studies of the South was similar to Botkin and Brown's in that he believed that a focus on specific regions, in his case the South, could educate Americans about the particular character of the region and inform local planning but could also contribute to a better national understanding of America as a country of developing and changing regions. Odum preferred to emphasise the economic plight of the South without reference to race. In contrast, race and class were central to Brown and Botkin's understanding of the folk, their lore and the regions in which they lived.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Botkin and Brown developed shared ideas about folklore in the early 1930s. They believed that it was important to preserve the 'survivals,' the stories, songs and customs that had been passed down orally. However, in contrast to the majority of folklorists of this period, they were convinced that folklore could be used creatively in new writing that illustrated changes in their society. Although American folklorists followed different schools of folklore, they were mostly from a literary tradition. They saw the collection and classification of 'survivals' and their transmission across space and time as their core professional responsibility. Their emphasis was on training folklorists to adhere to strict methodological frameworks; and following set conventions in terms of transcribing texts faithfully, providing extensive explanatory notes, and validating age and geographical origin. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in their understanding of 'survivals' was the notion that cultures evolved from the primitive to the civilised. Within the field of anthropology, Franz Boas and his students were also interested in folklore. Their views were rather different in that they did not see culture as a hierarchy from the primitive to the civilised. However,

Boas placed an equal emphasis on professional training and scholarly credibility. Folklorists were part of a profession that was not yet well embedded in the university system, and they were anxious to establish their credentials within the academy.

Botkin and Brown introduced a different way of thinking about, undertaking and disseminating folklore. Hence 'folk-say' described the real lives of many different Americans in their own words. It included black Americans, factory workers, farmers and many other contemporary groups whose words and songs were not usually recorded or considered important. Not only did they want to collect such folk materials but also they wanted them to be accessible to a wide audience of ordinary Americans, not just to scholars. Whilst Botkin advocated for the use of folklore to bring a regional literature alive, Brown was practising this method in his poetry and literary criticism. They considered southern writers' attempts to incorporate folklore dispassionately and critiqued those who were using folklore and regionalism in a reactionary, conservative and nostalgic way. They saw the merit in using folk expression as a way of developing an indigenous American culture.

Brown and Botkin were determined to use folklore and regionalism to expose inequality and oppression. They rejected the notion that the study and use of folklore must avoid political commitments; they were scholar activists. Brown's poetry was overtly political and Botkin included left-wing contributors within *Folk-Say*. They both sought to understand the changes underway in a fast-industrialising South and they studied new media such as phonograph records, slightly fearful of increasing commercialisation but recognising many real connections to the folk of country and city. Along with worker-writers such as Jack Conroy, Brown and Botkin noticed the adaptive qualities of Americans in expressing through folk materials their reactions to changes to their lives brought about by moving from farm to factory or the impact of the Great Depression. They shared a belief that folklore if marketed and publicised sufficiently could help a wider American public understand and empathize with the experiences of others beyond their own village, town, city, ethnic or religious group.

Botkin used the term 'New Regionalism' to describe a method of gathering, analysing and disseminating information from a particular region to help inform plans for the whole country. In literature and folklore, the concept of regionalism referred to the idea that if one wrote about the diversity in a particular region, one could show the specific qualities and experiences of its people but also help to form new and more inclusive ideas about the national American character and address stereotyping of different groups of people such as steelworkers or African American sharecroppers. This was not an idealistic nostalgia such as that put forward by the Nashville Agrarians but a new type of regionalism that could address contemporary concerns. Regionalism was embraced in the South by sociologists as well as by literary intellectuals but where Brown and Botkin differed from both the Chapel Hill Regionalists and the Agrarians was in their willingness to consider folklore and literature that tackled the challenges of the South in terms of race and class head on.

Changing the way folklore was collected, disseminated and utilized could play a part in creating a shared consciousness between farm and factory workers, and artists, intellectuals and activists. Focusing on the different regions of the United States and developing a common understanding of their needs, values and views could play a similar role. This nurturance of a shared consciousness would become a major preoccupation of the 1930s within the Popular Front, drawing together industrial unionists, socialists, communists, community and civil rights activists, writers and critics, and musicians. Although historian Michael Denning has described the Popular Front as really coming into its own after the strikes of 1934, I provide evidence above of Botkin and Brown's efforts to ferment a new and more radical attitude to folklore and culture as early as 1930. Although not interested in any simplistic notions of an idealized American 'common man,' Botkin and Brown would, over the course of the 1930s, become increasingly interested in how a democratic culture of the people could be encouraged. This incorporated a cultural resistance to the notion of a homogenous (white Anglo Saxon Protestant) American culture.

Botkin considered that folklore could serve a useful function in society as a whole. The folklore collections were to be accessible and appealing, designed for a wide audience, encouraging ordinary people to engage with aspects of American cultural life. Collecting folklore was increasingly a professionalized academic pursuit for an introspective audience of other scholars. Brown and Botkin challenged the direction the profession was taking. Botkin would be highly successful in this aim later on in his career. Between 1940 and 1960, he would publish more than a dozen treasuries of folklore for the mass market. This approach would not go unchallenged by folklorists within the academy. Folklorist Richard Dorson repeatedly and very publicly criticised Botkin for, in his opinion, damaging the profession. He believed that Botkin had abandoned careful scholarship in his desire to entertain the general public and achieve widespread popularity.⁸⁶ However, Botkin's objective was not to classify artifacts of the past but to make 'living-people lore' widely available in order to promote a diverse and democratic American culture and in that he was demonstrably successful.

Botkin's inclusion of Brown's poetry in his *Folk-Say* anthologies signified much more than a fleeting interest in African American themes, styles and politics. Botkin and Brown sought to initiate a debate about the meaning and significance of race, identity and culture within the changing America of the 1930s. *Folk-Say* was the starting point for their joint venture. Later in the 1930s, the federal funding provided by the Works Progress Administration's Arts Projects would allow Botkin, Brown and others to do much more. Their interest in folklore and literature would then be extended to a consideration of another use for folklore, in revising history. In the late 1930s, Botkin and Brown's involvement in the collection and dissemination of oral history accounts of slavery and its aftermath would, under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project, irrevocably change the historiography of American slavery and strongly challenge the stereotypes propounded by popular novelists like

⁸⁶ Richard M. Dorson, "Book Review: *A Treasury of New England Folklore*," *American Literature* 20, 1 (1948): 76-78; "Book Review: *A Treasury of Southern Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions, and Folkways of the People of the South*," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 37, 2 (1950): 354-55; "Book Review: *A Treasury of Southern Folklore*," *Journal of American Folklore* 63, 250 (1950): 480-82.

Thomas Nelson Page since the 1880s. That will be the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter 3. 'The Portrait of the Negro as American' - Sterling A. Brown and the Federal Writers' Project

Introduction

In April 1936, Sterling Brown was appointed Editor for Negro Affairs on the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). His decision to move away from writing poetry and literary criticism appears curious. Although the role called on his literary training, it would draw him into social research, a field in which he had no professional expertise. However, in the context of the objectives he shared with his allies at the time, his decision to the FWP is not strange. As his ally folklorist Benjamin Botkin put it, it gave academics the opportunity to participate in what they considered to be "the greatest educational as well as social experiment" of their time.¹ The position of Editor of Negro Affairs gave him an unprecedented opportunity to address the treatment of African Americans within the national literature, and to address the fact that whether within fiction or historical or social science texts, the race was frequently written about "as a problem, not as a participant," and "too seldom ... revealed as a integral part of American life."²

The FWP was set up in the mid 1930s by the Roosevelt government as part of the wider federal work relief program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Federal Arts Projects (including the FWP) would provide useful employment to a wide variety of white-collar workers in financial distress. Through the WPA and the Federal Arts Projects, and at a time when segregation was endemic in the South and an unofficial but daily reality in many other regions, employment opportunities were to be opened up to African Americans. This was progressive in a period of poverty and destitution that affected African Americans disproportionately. Considered equally important by many African Americans and progressive whites was the

¹ B. A. Botkin, "WPA and Folklore Research: 'Bread and Song'," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3, 1 (1939): 10-11.

² Sterling A. Brown to Mr. Munson, 9 Jan 1940, United States Work Projects Administration Records, A1-A6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

ability through FWP to present a racially inclusive perspective on American history and culture.

It was a point in time when, as cultural historian George Hutchinson notes, “possibilities for coalitions of cultural reformers were envisioned and exploited” across racial lines.³ Hutchinson was referring to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s as such a moment, which he positively interpreted as a platform for a great flourishing of black artistic talent and for interracial alliances that functioned to nurture their growth. The FWP was similar as it presented new possibilities for producing and understanding American life as diverse, culturally pluralistic and inclusive of all races and classes of people. However, black artists and intellectuals tussled with the tensions of unequal power differentials across the race line in the Harlem Renaissance and with a battle for control in relation to the ways in which black Americans were represented. The FWP brought similar conflicts into play, as black intellectuals struggled to ensure that the portrayal of American life incorporated its black citizens, was accurate and had integrity.

Brown’s political outlook had become more radical in this period. He had returned to Harvard in the academic year 1931/1932 to study for a doctorate on ‘The Negro in American Literature,’ a project that he was never to complete. As noted in chapter two, he came into contact with the left-wing radicals involved in the Rebel Poets and with the development of the “worker-writers” or proletarian literature movement.⁴ He became a close friend of black Marxist philosopher Eugene Clay Holmes, who would become a colleague at Howard as Professor and Chair of Philosophy. They were involved together in organisations such as the League of American Writers and the League against War and Fascism.⁵ Holmes would serve as Brown’s assistant at the Federal Writers’ Project. Other worker-writers such as Jack Conroy and John Rogers would also find employment on the Federal Writers’ Project.⁶ A significant number of writers were drawn to the Communist Party

³ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 26.

⁴ Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America*, 255.

⁵ Eugene Clay Holmes, "Letters Page," *Ebony* (1977).

⁶ Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America*, 422-28.

because of its commitment to African American rights, which became, according to James Smethurst, “a virtual religion for communists, black and white” in this period. In contrast to other historians (such as Nathan Huggins) who saw African American followers of the CPUSA in the 1930s as dupes used by the Party, Smethurst argues convincingly that African Americans’ involvement was a rational and unblinkered choice. The CPUSA gave black writers access to institutions and to potential funding for their work, as well as to a wider and racially mixed audience through publication in left-wing journals.⁷

As noted in chapter two, Brown’s poetry of the 1930s featured themes that were more overtly political than *Southern Road*, focusing on labour and racial oppression. In the poem ‘Side by Side’, Brown set out the similarities between black and white southerners:

I speak about same food, living on different sides of the track but they
don’t get no money, neither one of them, they’re set against each
other.⁸

He emphasised the commonalities between poor southerners, black and white, and the ability of the southern elite to exploit them by deepening racial rifts.

Brown came to the FWP with a strong reputation as an outspoken poet and critic. The weight of expectation upon him, and upon other black leaders, was heavy. Since the early 1930s and his friendship with folklorist Benjamin Botkin, his interracial connections had multiplied but he still operated mainly in a segregated African American world. He struggled financially. His political views had been radicalized and he wanted change, but he was sceptical about whether the unity sought, for example, in the labour movement would last, and worried that African Americans would be let down in that interracial alliance. Nevertheless, Brown was part of a loose network of black and white intellectuals who shared, at least in part, artistic and political values and were coming to a broader understanding of what the inclusion of a

⁷ Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946*, 24-34.

⁸ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

diverse American population meant for the national culture. The FWP was an opportunity to test whether interracial alliances could strengthen and whether a shared vision of American culture that fully included African Americans could reach a far wider audience.

My examination of Brown's role as Editor of Negro Affairs illuminates the tensions at work between black and white intellectuals involved in the FWP, and demonstrates that these were not confined to challenging those with conservative or white supremacist views but equally extended to those who would have considered themselves liberals in their attitudes to race relations. Cultural historian Jerrold Hirsch provides a favourable account of the shared vision held by national FWP officials, and Rebecca Sklaroff argues that the dialogue opened up by the FWP was as central to civil rights history as the struggles for equality in employment, the legal system and the armed services.⁹ My examination of Sterling Brown's experiences on the FWP reveals a more complex picture involving disappointment and disillusionment for black intellectuals as the scale of compromise required to produce the FWP publications took its toll. That there was a sort of coalition across racial lines within the FWP at the national level cannot be denied but it was a coalition brokered and sustained at a cost to its African American participants.

America in the 1930s was a nation that variously ignored African Americans, categorised the race as its most challenging social problem, or demeaned African Americans with stereotypes of them as unfit for participation as equal citizens. Through his poetry and literary criticism, Brown portrayed southern black life and folk culture in all its complexity and vitality. He sought to demonstrate aspects of black American heritage, character and experience neglected or caricatured by other poets, and to challenge literary stereotypes by demonstrating why they prevailed, and that their political function was to maintain the low status of blacks in a white supremacist society. Through the FWP, he aimed to ensure African Americans were depicted fairly in a national record of American history and character. The 'Negro as an American' would

⁹ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*; Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, xv.

at least be included and, at best, studied with sympathy and understanding. The FWP provided a broad audience; Brown could potentially influence attitudes to African Americans far beyond the reach he could have exerted through his poetry or through the literary criticism he had written for African American journals up to this point.

The Establishment of the FWP

Although Roosevelt had not made any pledges on improving race relations, advocates of race equality were nevertheless excited by the sense that there was a shift in power from conservative business interests and local politics to the federal government. Kirby notes three conferences that took place in 1933 and focused on giving greater priority to the economic needs of African Americans. These included the 'Economic Status of the Negro' conference in Washington in May 1933 sponsored by the Rosenwald Fund, the NAACP national conference in June, and the Second Amenia Conference at the home of NAACP president Joel E. Spingarn in July.¹⁰ As noted in chapter two, the Amenia Conference was specifically called to revitalize the NAACP by engaging the critical thinking and more radical perspectives of younger black intellectuals such as Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier and Sterling Brown on the economic status of the race. Each gathering of black intellectuals differed in emphasis but all were agreed on the potential of the New Deal administration in tackling black issues through federal intervention.

White intellectuals such as Edwin R. Embree, president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, and Will Alexander, Director of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, lobbied hard to ensure that African Americans could influence the federal government. Against the protest of some black leaders, a white southerner, Clark Foreman, was appointed as a special adviser on the 'economic status of the Negro' under Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior. Kirby argues that

¹⁰ John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era : Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 15.

in the early 1930s, with little national liberal or left agitation for civil rights and a social climate still hostile to race opportunity, the contributions of interracialists like Embree, Alexander, Foreman, and Ickes were crucial.

Ickes had strong personal ties to the NAACP and the National Urban League, he drew many racial liberals including some African Americans into positions of influence within the administration, and he was an outspoken advocate for African Americans in government. In a 1934 article, Foreman articulated the administration's vision of liberal reform as it applied to the relationship of the races:

everyone interested in achieving a fair opportunity for advancement on the part of the colored population must welcome the social theories of the New Deal and the clear intention of the administration to apply these theories without reference to race.¹¹

Hence, race liberals within government intended to drive forward improvements to the situation of black Americans by ensuring a fair deal within the New Deal. As Sklaroff demonstrates, liberal officials within the administration had a "sustained commitment to addressing the concerns of black Americans" even though New Deal politicians felt that they could not make changes to legislation and policy due to political constraints.¹²

On 8 September 1935, the *Washington Post* announced the "New Deal's Huge Cultural Program Launched with \$27,000,000 Fund."¹³ It is testament to the confidence of the Roosevelt administration that it dared to set aside millions of dollars to fund creative artists in Writers', Theatre, Art and Music Projects. Federal One, as the Arts Projects were known, was a minor element within the WPA, established through the New Deal's Emergency Relief Act of 1935.¹⁴ Although the combined budget of the Arts Projects amounted to a fraction of the overall expenditure on the WPA programmes, nevertheless, the federal government had taken a radical step in providing relief to thousands of

¹¹ Ibid., 17-47.

¹² Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, xii.

¹³ Marguerite Drennan, "New Deal's Huge Cultural Program Launched with \$27,000,000 Fund," *Washington Post*, 8 Sep 1935, B9.

¹⁴ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston [Mass.]: Little, Brown, 1972), 39.

individuals, with the expectation that the artists in return would produce their wares for the benefit of the national American culture. In a history of the FWP, Jerre Mangione declared it a “governmental adventure in cultural collectivism, the like of which no nation has experienced before or since.” Mangione was partisan, having worked on the FWP, but his assessment was apt. Although the FWP employed historians, journalists, novelists, poets and playwrights, the vast majority of its employees had less claim to the term ‘writer’: teachers, technical writers, librarians, copywriters and many other unemployed white-collar workers joined the Project. At its peak of employment in April 1936, there were 6,686 individuals on the payroll.¹⁵

Brown’s appointment was, in part, the result of external pressure from African American leaders, including those acting as policy advisers on President Roosevelt’s ‘Black Cabinet,’ to ensure that a suitably qualified African American be appointed at a national level within the Federal Arts Projects.¹⁶ It was a great honour to be appointed into this historic role. Now the mantle that his father had urged him to take up, that of “high and invincible leadership” was put upon him. However, the consequence of this was that, although he likely did not realise the implications at the outset, for a few years, Brown’s creative writing would take a back seat to a heavy workload of editorial and administrative duties.

Henry G. Alsberg was appointed Head of the FWP. He and Brown shared a similar educational background and commitment to social justice. Like Brown, Alsberg had studied literature at Harvard as a postgraduate. His varied career history prepared him well for the FWP. He had worked as a journalist and travelled in Russia after the Bolsheviks took power, dispensing aid on behalf of the American Joint Distribution Committee. Although he became disillusioned with the Bolsheviks, his commitment to social justice did not wane. Alongside activism, he was interested in the arts. He had been a director of the Provincetown Playhouse in New York, where he helped to produce Paul Green’s “In Abraham’s Bosom”. (Brown had often praised Paul

¹⁵ Ibid., 42, 9.

¹⁶ Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 67.

Green's plays as demonstrating the cultural similarities between poor whites and black southerners: "superstitions, moonshining, camp meeting debaucheries, illiteracy, dialect – none of these are inalienable monopolies of either group)."¹⁷

Editors within the FWP's national team shared a number of characteristics as Hirsch demonstrates with reference to Alsberg, Brown, folklorist Benjamin Botkin, and the social-ethnic studies editor Morton Royse. Broadly, these included an Ivy League education, and an interest in travel, social work and the arts. Hirsch views national FWP officials as "romantic nationalists" who wanted to revitalise the national culture through studying the lives of ordinary Americans. They were cultural pluralists and wanted to include a diverse range of American groups in their studies, and they believed that Americans of all backgrounds would gain from a deeper understanding of other American communities and regions.¹⁸ They were also influenced by anthropologist Franz Boas's argument that culture should be considered within its own context rather than against a set of absolute standards (see chapter two). Hirsch argues that FWP officials tried to stretch the notion of who was American to encompass a much more culturally diverse nation through the use of folklore and folksong, the narratives of ex-slaves, and the life histories of ordinary people. Their aim was to create a "unifying tradition" across groups, all of whom were capable of functioning as full American citizens.¹⁹

The exception to this was John A. Lomax, an older and more conservative southern folklorist. Although Lomax shared with FWP colleagues the ability to see artistic value in the folklore of those 'lower down' the social ladder, he saw the increasingly modern world as a threat to American culture. He feared that rural communities living in isolation would disappear and worried that this would annihilate their folk traditions. He was a romantic conservative and a racial paternalist who looked upon southern hierarchical tradition with affection. Lomax's underlying political beliefs about African Americans meant

¹⁷ Sterling A. Brown, "Poor Whites," *Opportunity* 9, 10 (1931): 317, 20.

¹⁸ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19, 4-5.

that although he celebrated black cultural achievements, his celebration was linked to ideas about African Americans as primitive and inferior.²⁰ Lomax was employed by the FWP between June 1936 and October 1937. Benjamin Botkin replaced him in May 1938 and, as demonstrated in chapter two, his views on diversity and inclusion were similar to Brown's.

As Hirsch ably demonstrates, Alsberg's vision of American culture was democratic and broad. He aimed to widen participation in the production and reception of American culture to a wider group of Americans: African Americans, European immigrants, industrial workers, and rural communities would be the new writers and make up part of his audience. His choice of staff reflected his aim of broader participation, he employed editors with an interest in folklore and the lives of ethnic minorities and those who were interested in exploring the characteristics of America's varied regions and communities.²¹ Their editorial objectives would support a "national integration that was inclusive, not exclusive, and democratic, not coercive." Hirsch's assessment of the FWP's achievements is more reserved. The national staff promoted an inclusive vision of America and was ideological and reformist, challenging an accepted portrait of white Protestant America. However, they were less clear about how change could be achieved.²²

The American Guide Series

Alsberg needed a project that would be accepted as beneficial to the nation. He found his solution in the American Guide Series. The guides would describe the history, culture, and achievements of every state of the Union. The guides were the idea of a Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) supervisor in Michigan, Henry S. Curtis. He envisaged a "sort of public Baedeker, which would point out to the curious traveler the points of real travel value in each state and county." Englishman Findlay Muirhead had

²⁰ "Modernity, Nostalgia, and Southern Folklore Studies: The Case of John Lomax," *Journal of American Folklore* 105, 416 (1992): 183-207; Benjamin Filene, "'Our Singing Country': John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past," *American Quarterly* 43, 4 (1991): 602-24.

²¹ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 239.

²² Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 3-6.

written the USA Baedeker. Originally published in 1893 and not revised since 1909, it was very dated. The American Guides would encourage tourism and investment and nurture regional and national pride. In Connecticut, a joint FERA and Civil Works Administration (CWA) project had already produced a guide.²³ Alongside the Guides, Alsberg hoped to publish specialist studies that would contribute to the development of American culture.

The WPA released a statement that the FWP would employ:

writers, editors, historians, research workers, art critics, architects, archaeologists, map draftsmen, geologists, and other professional workers for the preparation of an American Guide and the accumulation of new research material on matters of local, historical, art and scientific interest in the United Statesand the preparation of a limited number of special studies in the arts, history, economics, sociology, etc., by qualified writers on relief.²⁴

Alsberg defended his federal writers:

We don't have to worry about the creative ability of these people just because they have been held down to pot-boiler jobs. Their creative abilities have been tested.²⁵

However, the reality was that the vast majority of relief staff were not experienced, skilled writers – many were not writers at all. Nevertheless, Alsberg was convinced that works of lasting value would be produced.

The American Guide Series was successful in a number of ways. It achieved its main objective – in providing gainful employment to white-collar workers. Artistically, the Guides were “relieved from the dry dullness of most guidebooks by intelligent editing, good writing, and a wealth of interesting illustrations.”²⁶ Influential critics and Pulitzer Prize winning authors, including Bernard De Voto, Van Wyck Brooks, and Harry Hansen praised the Guides.²⁷ Historian Monty Penkower argued that the Guides were successful

²³ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 46.

²⁴ Ibid., 47.

²⁵ Henry Alsberg, quoted in Drennan, "New Deal's Huge Cultural Program Launched with \$27,000,000 Fund."

²⁶ Bruce Catton, "A Book a Day," *Herald-Journal*, 6 Sep 1938.

²⁷ Bernard De Voto, "The First WPA Guide," *Saturday Review of Literature* 15 (1937): 8; Georgia Humanities Council, *The New Georgia Guide* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.; Christine Bold, "The WPA Guides Mapping America," (1999): 120.

because their means of production and their content chimed with wider social currents. Americans were re-examining their past and their values in the wake of the Great Depression.²⁸ There was a new interest in history, sparked by historical novels such as Stark Young's *So Red the Rose* and the bestselling novel of 1936 and 1937, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.

A desire to counter the widely popular but deeply romanticised depictions of southern history, of which Mitchell's novel was but one example, was a central driver for Brown in his role as National Editor of Negro Affairs. Although Brown wrote little directly about his involvement in the FWP, his detailed examinations of the treatment of "The Negro in American Fiction" in 1931 and 1936 encapsulate his views and what he was trying to achieve. The essence of his argument was that social policy was at the root of the treatment of African Americans in fiction, where they were ignored or stereotyped. Generalisations about 'Negro types' and the notion of specific 'racial qualities' unique to black Americans were a justification for the maintenance of unfair and unequal racial practices and policies that limited the opportunities open to them.²⁹

Ensuring that African Americans were represented accurately in the state guides would be the major focus of Brown's first period of employment on the project, from April 1936 to September 1937. Working alongside him was a small team of African Americans from Howard University: Glaucia Roberts, Eugene Holmes and Ulysses Lee. According to Mangione, it took Brown and his team months to achieve editorial influence in the states' field offices.³⁰ This was partly because many of the States' 48 Directors resented the intrusion of the Washington office into their affairs. Particularly in the Deep South, the meddling of African American editors was insufferable. Myrtle Miles, Director of the Alabama FWP, questioned Brown's credentials:

Alabamians understand the Alabama Negro and the general Negro situation in Alabama better than a critic whose life has been spent in

²⁸ Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project : A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 238.

²⁹ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors."

³⁰ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 259.

another section of the country, however studious, however learned he may be.³¹

In his battles with Directors about the jaded stereotypes served up to describe the black populations in their districts, Brown had some support from Henry Alsberg who sporadically intervened in these skirmishes. Furthermore, the organisational structure of the FWP meant that the State Directors were required to take advice from Brown and his team, although they did not always comply with their directions. Historian Rebecca Sklaroff emphasises the “political weight” of Brown’s directorship and the significance of the requirement that “all state editors had to recognize his authority and submit copy to him, even if they disagreed with his suggestions.” She notes that Brown was in a position of authority and was the most senior African American across the four WPA arts programmes.

Sklaroff claims that Henry Alsberg appointed Brown because he recognised him as “a guardian of black history,” but this must describe his attitude and commitment as he had no professional training in historical scholarship.³² Brown’s training was in literature. His involvement with folklore and history came about because he was “fascinated by the lives of my people and the misinterpretations of my people.”³³ Through the FWP, Brown had substantial support and resources with which to answer the question, what does it mean to be an African American, to counter stereotypes, and to correct the inaccuracies that were rife in the newspaper articles, books and on the radio about African American history and culture (when it was mentioned at all). This was a fruitless task in some states given the low calibre of many of the staff and the political views of the personnel at the helm.

Brown faced a difficult task in challenging the conservative State Editors within the southern states. His editorial comments on the Alabama draft state guide give a flavour. Commenting on the “frenzied sidewalk dances” of the local African American population, which the guidebook copy claimed were “not those taught in civilized ballrooms,” Brown noted sardonically that

³¹ Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, 175.

³² *Ibid.*, 136, 31.

³³ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

if not taught in 'civilized ballrooms,' the same dances are danced at upper-class parties, white and Negro – the Charleston, the Lindy Hop and the Big Apple not being limited to either race. The relationship of these dances to the jungle is debatable.

In many towns with a significant African American population, such as Mobile and Decatur, blacks were invisible. For example, in September 1937, Brown highlighted to the Alabama Writers' Project that "Negroes in Mobile are sufficiently colorful and numerous to warrant inclusion, however brief." The contemporary life of black Alabamans was often omitted altogether, with inadequate mention of their schools, churches or working lives.³⁴

Although Florida's copy came in for significant praise from Brown and could be called progressive in comparison to the Alabama submission, Brown's Negro Affairs staff provided three pages of detailed feedback on the "Racial Elements in Florida" chapter of the state guide which included acerbic comments such as "there is no such thing as a 'Negro shanty' style of architecture."³⁵ Texan African Americans apparently had "the racial gift of melody"; in Mississippi, the "folk Negro" was

a genial mass of remarkable qualities. He seems carefree and shrewd and does not bother himself with the problems the white man has to solve.

African Americans in Beaufort, South Carolina, were a "picturesque group." The Florence entry in the Alabama State Guide described "mammies in bandanas" arguing with "educated young women in modern dress over the best methods of seasoning 'potlicker' or feeding and training babies."³⁶ In the Deep South, Brown confronted directly the plantation tradition he had written about in *The Negro in American Fiction*. Originating in early American novels, it showed no signs of decline in books, radio shows, and advertising in the 1930s: "over a century old, it still guarantees best selling fame."³⁷ This was a world in which

³⁴ Federal Writers' Project, American Guide File, State Guide File, United States Work Projects Administration Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D. C.

³⁵ Stetson Kennedy, "Florida Folklife and the WPA, an Introduction," Division of Historical Resources.

³⁶ Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, 173-77.

³⁷ Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, 17.

happy slaves are forever singing in the beautiful fields of white cotton, and forever black mammies fondle their little morses and missies and exude love for all the rich folks in Dixie, and body servants rescue the perishing, care for the dying, serve their beloved masters until death let them depart in peace, to serve in heaven, forever and ever.³⁸

As Brown also carefully recorded, in plantation fiction what was omitted was as important as the stereotypes that were included: “The intractable, the ironic, the abused Negro is nowhere on these plantations.” Runaways are “generally flighty creatures and half-wits, and even they finally steal back to the South.” The brutality of slavery was missing: “occasional whippings are shown to be for due cause such as stealing a ham from a poor woman who could not spare it.” Slavery was “a beneficent guardianship.” And in Reconstruction, the images were “needed to prove that Negroes were happy as slaves and hopelessly unequipped for freedom, so that slavery could be resurrected in practice though not in name.”³⁹ In many cases, Brown and his team tried to achieve a balance in the guides: for example, suggesting the inclusion of the 1917 race riots in the Illinois State Guide, highlighting the successful segments of the African American population in various states, and requesting revisions to copy that ignored the realities of racial discrimination in education, employment and living conditions.⁴⁰

Through a detailed critique of copy, Brown strove to ensure that black Americans were not ignored or stereotyped within the State Guides. It was a thankless and exhausting task, which was often more administrative than creative, but Brown nevertheless set to it with gusto. He rose to the challenge because he saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity. Federal government sponsorship of this cultural project could bring authority and resources to Brown’s vision of an American landscape that valued the culture of African Americans. It could also wield an influence far beyond the solo attempts in the 1920s of individual cultural ‘brokers’ such as Alain Locke or Charles S. Johnson. Under Alsberg’s leadership, the FWP could sponsor a vision of American culture and history that encompassed all US citizens. The output –

³⁸ Ibid., 62-63.

³⁹ Ibid., 28, 49. See also discussion of fiction in the ‘plantation tradition’ in chapter two.

⁴⁰ Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, 164-71.

the American State Guides – undoubtedly presented a more accurate account of the States and their racial diversity than would have been the case without Brown's efforts.

The original intention was that Brown would work in an editorial and advisory capacity only but he soon began to visit southern projects to monitor progress, help sort out difficulties or get separate African American projects established.⁴¹ For example, in July 1937, Brown visited the Florida FWP offices in Jacksonville having written to the State Director Dr. Corse to explain that he would confer with her "regarding editorial procedure" and would want to "inspect the Negro projects," as well as "assist in editing material to be used in the Negro section of the Florida state book."⁴² He also made attempts to monitor the number of African Americans on the staff and to push for specific individuals to be hired or prevent lay-offs. Florida did not initially fare too badly with ten black staff 'on' out of a total of 200 although cuts and quota reductions in the summer of 1937 reduced the number to three. By 1937, only 106 out of 4,500 FWP writers were African Americans.⁴³ When black staff could not resolve problems of discrimination in their local project, they turned to the National Editor of Negro Affairs for support and intervention. In Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, New York and Illinois, separate black units were established.

‘The Negro in Washington’

Alsberg asked Brown to write an essay about Washington D.C.'s African American population to be included in the Washington D.C. Guide, published in April 1937 as *Washington: City and Capital*. Brown's contribution "The Negro in Washington" exemplifies the approach and ethos he wished to see across the American Guides. The essay was divided into three parts: pre Civil War; from emancipation to the turn of the century; and the twentieth century.

⁴¹ Jerre Mangione, "Sterling A. Brown and the Federal Writers' Project," in *Sterling A. Brown: A UMUM Tribute*, ed. Black History Museum Committee (1982), 15.

⁴² Kennedy, "Florida Folklife and the WPA, an Introduction."

⁴³ Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, 159.

In describing the city before emancipation, Brown highlighted “the shabby contrast between the profession of democracy and the practice of slavery” and “the brutality of the working and living conditions of slaves in the District of Columbia.” He wrote in detail of the “extensive slave trading conducted” in D.C., describing the location of slave jails across the city, the appalling conditions within them, and the efforts of those who protested against them. He gave examples of “important stopping places” on the Underground Railroad, where residents of D.C. had created places of refuge for slaves on the journey to freedom. He outlined the situation of free blacks before the Civil War, the constraints upon them and the opportunities they created in education, housing and employment.⁴⁴

The changing demographics of D.C. after the Civil War made Washington “a Mecca for Negroes” and brought tens of thousands of illiterate and penniless black refugees to the city. Brown described the development of tenements and the notorious ‘alley system’:

Here, in these disease-infested sties, ex-slaves got their first taste of freedom. And it is here that, in too large numbers, their children’s children still drag out their lives.

Crime, violence, illegitimacy, poor health and early death were common, but Brown noted that black Americans established lodges, churches and schools, and with the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau and missionary organizations, “waged a determined though hard-pressed battle against prejudice, poverty, and ignorance.” Progress in education and in business was documented, as were political and cultural developments.⁴⁵

In the twentieth century, Brown noted that black Americans followed their leaders’ advice to “forget grievances and close ranks for the sake of democracy.” He listed the many achievements of African Americans in the First World War, and the anger that ensued when democratic rights were not extended to black citizens after the war ended. Migration from the South

⁴⁴ Sterling A. Brown, “The Negro in Washington,” in *Washington: City and Capital*, ed. Works Progress Administration Federal Writers’ Project (US Government Printing Office, 1937), 68-74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 74-80.

brought greater poverty, disease and hardship to black residents of the city. By the mid 1930s, very little progress had been made in improving the situation of the black poor, who continued to dwell in the alleys and slum streets of the capital.⁴⁶ Brown's essay provided strong evidence of his claims for both the achievements and the constraints on African Americans in the city, included positive statements about exemplary figures in both the black and white races and he was direct about the failings of the political and legal system in race relations. Although hard-hitting in its description of both the history and the contemporary situation of the city's black population, the essay provoked little controversy upon its publication in 1936. The D.C. Guide was very successful and its first edition of 8,000 copies sold out quickly.⁴⁷

By 1939, Brown's essay had become extremely controversial. The House Subcommittee on Appropriations (the Woodrum Committee) was searching for evidence that the FWP incited class hatred. Republican Congressman Frank Keefe claimed that parts of the guidebooks were influenced by "communist agitators" and used Brown's Washington essay as an example of writing designed to "stimulate a feeling of class hatred." The material Keefe found objectionable was a claim, made almost in passing in the Guide, that George Washington Parke Custis, foster son of President George Washington and father in law of Robert E. Lee, had left a portion of land in Arlington to a black daughter named Maria Syphax. In a letter to Alsberg, Brown noted that

I wrote the sentence because I was convinced of its accuracy. The relationship has long been a matter of common belief among Negroes of Washington and among certain white people. I had heard of it for years. My historical source, however, was the article by E. Delorus Preston [*Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XX (4), October 1935].

Although Keefe had described Preston as a 'young Negro student trained at Howard University,' he was a historian with a PhD from Ohio State University, who was at the time Dean of Edward Waters College in

⁴⁶ Ibid., 80-83.

⁴⁷ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 292.

Jacksonville, Florida.⁴⁸ Brown produced pages of carefully referenced historical sources for his claim about Syphax alongside his robust response:

I am not a Communist and have never been one. The purpose of the essay that I prepared was to record to the best of my knowledge and ability the history and social conditions of the Negro in Washington. I do not see how the essay as a whole or in the specific section that shocked Congressman Keefe can be considered communistic or Nazi-fascistic propaganda.⁴⁹

The incident was reported in the *Washington Afro-American* under the headline "Senator's Blast Serves to Open Closet Wider", accompanied by a chart showing numerous African American descendants of George Washington Parke Custis.⁵⁰

Brown claimed with a degree of pride in an interview many years later that his essay contributed to the Project's eventual demise:

I helped to kill the project, I wrote an essay on the Negroes of Washington and in it I said that George Washington Parke Custis had a coloured daughter. And they called me a communist for that and they read me in the Record. Senator Reynolds of the great Reynolds tobacco people in North Carolina read me and then a guy named Keefe from Wisconsin read me into the Congressional Record as a communist.

It is notable that even many years later, Brown felt that it was not the charge of miscegenation that had angered the politicians but his forthright exposure of the conditions in which African Americans in the capitol lived:

Now what they had against me was that I pointed out that in the shadow of the capitol were some of the worst ghettos in the world, some of the worst slums. And I attacked the segregated schools system and I just attacked left and right and nothing that strong had ever been written in a government publication ...⁵¹

The Ex-Slave Narratives

⁴⁸ Florence Kerr to Walter Chandler, 2 Jun 1939, Federal Writers' Project: Administrative File, 1935-1941: Correspondence, Box A6.

⁴⁹ Sterling A. Brown to Henry G. Alsberg, 10 Apr 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 53, Folder Syphax.

⁵⁰ "Senator's Blast Serves to Open Closet Wider," *Washington Afro-American*, 15 Apr 1939, 48.

⁵¹ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

The gathering of ex-slave narratives was a task that would not have been achieved without the resources of the FWP. There were about 100,000 former slaves still living in the late 1930s.⁵² Charles S. Johnson had in 1929 organised for ex-slaves to be interviewed about their lives by a member of his department, Ophelia Settle, as part of a community study he initiated around Nashville, later extended further into Tennessee and Kentucky.⁵³ Lawrence Reddick, while a Professor of Negro History at Kentucky State Industrial College in 1934, obtained funding from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to carry out a study of ex-slaves in the same area. The project extended to eighteen states by 1935 when the FWP was established but it was not transferred over to the new project. Independent of this, the Negro Unit of the Virginia FWP began interviewing elderly former slaves and freed people in November 1936, and Georgia and South Carolina and other projects also interviewed ex-slaves.

Folklore editor John Lomax was unaware of the studies already underway. His introduction to the ex-slave narratives came through the Florida FWP in March 1937 when interviews from Florida were discussed by Brown, Lomax and George Cronyn, associate director of the FWP. Lomax took the decision to extend the interviews across the southern and border states in April 1937 and he issued a set of questions to the (mostly white) interviewers in the states. The interview prompts covered the day-to-day lives of the slaves – what they ate and wore, how they were treated, how they spent their leisure time. Historian Sharon Musher points out that when the FWP formally took over the collection of ex-slave narratives, ownership and implementation of the project in effect transferred “from the hands of black academics, college graduates, and graduate students primarily to those of white government bureaucrats and relief workers.”⁵⁴ Interviewing went on until at least spring of 1939, by which time almost 2,200 interviews had been returned to the national office.⁵⁵

⁵² Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 263.

⁵³ See chapter one for further information regarding Charles S. Johnson.

⁵⁴ Sharon Ann Musher, "Contesting 'the Way the Almighty Wants It': Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 53, 1 (2001): 1-31.

⁵⁵ Charles L. Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat : Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), xv-xvii.

As Musher proves through a thorough analysis, the Texas and Mississippi slave narratives were particularly prone to interference by the state offices. Texas state editors reviewed and revised almost half of the 591 interviews submitted in order to make them conform to their idea of “proper race relations of the time” and removing accounts of cruelty by masters to slaves, of the existence of freedmen, of black cultural practices, and of black persecution during Reconstruction and thereafter. Mississippi editors altered the majority of interviews submitted to Washington (21/26) but more significantly, withheld 500 interviews. Historian George Rawick discovered these in the 1970s and concluded that they were deliberately held back.⁵⁶

Brown did not initially have a great deal to do with the ex-slave narratives but he believed in the benefits of the project in challenging the accounts of slavery as an institution put forward by southern historians who were apologists for white supremacy: “we were tired of the slave being interpreted by Ulrich Phillips.”⁵⁷ As Musher observes, the focus of Lomax’s original interview questions was narrow: he was interested in “daily life, folk songs, and superstitious practices”. Musher provides an example of a question about food: “What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best?” These replaced “the themes that had interested black interviewers: racial uplift, slave resistance, and attitudes toward freedom.”⁵⁸ While Lomax was on a leave of absence, Brown worked with Benjamin Botkin (who was in Washington on a Library of Congress fellowship) to expand the original questions that Lomax had set.⁵⁹ On 30 July 1937, Alsberg sent a new draft of Lomax’s interview schedule to the state offices, which began with ten additional questions set by Brown and Botkin. These included questions for the ex-slaves about what they knew or thought about slave rebellions, Reconstruction, blacks’ voting, holding office, and organizing secret societies.⁶⁰ Brown also instructed the interviewers to simplify the way that they recounted the speech of black southerners “in order

⁵⁶ Musher, “Contesting “the Way the Almighty Wants It”,” 1-31.

⁵⁷ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

⁵⁸ Musher, “Contesting “the Way the Almighty Wants It”,” 1-31.

⁵⁹ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

⁶⁰ Musher, “Contesting “the Way the Almighty Wants It”,” 1-31.

to hold the interest and attention of the reader”, encouraging them to ensure that “truth to idiom be paramount and exact truth to pronunciation secondary.” He was direct in his instructions that

the stories be told in the language of the ex-slave, without excessive editorializing and ‘artistic’ introductions on the part of the interviewer. The contrast between the directness of the ex-slave and the roundabout and at times pompous comments of the interviewer is frequently glaring.⁶¹

Despite Brown’s efforts, Musher concludes that Lomax’s interview questions were most frequently used and that they undermined the project’s original objectives of “contest[ing] racist assumptions about slavery” and replaced it with responses that “unemployed white-collar workers could use to record nostalgically the passing away of a generation.”⁶²

In most states, white interviewers sought the accounts of ex-slaves and Brown was concerned as to how to get the voices of the ex-slaves represented accurately. He noted in a 1979 interview that when they managed to get “a few Negroes on [the payroll],” they would be told “different stories from Aunt Nancy [white interviewer].” The white editors would explain to the national FWP office that “of course the first story’s right because the white interviewers got it and you can’t expect Negro interviewers to get this, you see.” Brown pointed out that “the white interviewers were anxious to show the benevolent guardianship of slavery and the good masters and so forth.”⁶³ In personal letters exchanged in 1937, he and his friend Charles S. Johnson joked about the constraints. Johnson wrote:

The other day a gentleman on one of the writers’ projects did telephone to inquire if I had any ex-slaves running around our building. He said that Washington had ordered that they find some and get from them some of the nice things that happened weh back yonduh that wasn’t written down because although their hearts was a white as any white man’s some of them couldn’t write, and now Washington wanted to make this a part of official history ...He wanted me to select very carefully and find one who wouldn’t get over into controversial

⁶¹ Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat : Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, 380-81.

⁶² Musher, “Contesting “the Way the Almighty Wants It”,” 1-31.

⁶³ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

matters, because many of them, you know, being old, have bad memories and remember only bad things bout those days.⁶⁴

Brown wrote back in the same vein:

The avoidance of controversial matter [sic] reminds me of the dear old lady, who found that each ex-slave narrative she had collected had contained something about whipping or cruelties. So she cut that part out from all except two. 'I do not want the readers to be bored,' she said. 'They all say the same thing, that they were whipped.'⁶⁵

Brown was aware of how reticent southern blacks were about speaking up to white strangers, regardless of their attitudes to blacks, about poor treatment under slavery:

there's no black that I know of in the South who sees a strange white man come in and he says was your master good to you, I don't know any black, including PhDs, who's going to say what the guy was really like. Most of them said he was a good man but the plantation across there, that man was awful, they always would shift it to the other place.⁶⁶

Botkin was employed by the Library of Congress between 1939 and 1941 to organise the ex-slave material so that future scholars could make use of them and in 1945, he published *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*. In the 1970s, George Rawick made the complete interview collection available for scholars.⁶⁷ Apologists for slavery and for white supremacy, in the academy and beyond, at the time and in subsequent decades, scoffed at the notion that there was value in the memories put forward by elderly ex-slaves in the 1930s. The accounts were believed to be unreliable because of the age of the informants, the varied skills of the interviewers, the racial dynamics and the political context of the segregated south. It was not until the 1970s that historians such as C. Vann Woodward, Norman Yetman, Eugene Genovese, and John Blassingame began to argue that the narratives were only as biased as any other historical text. Although Musher has more recently provided a number of 'health warnings' about limitations and distortions within the

⁶⁴ Charles S. Johnson to Sterling A. Brown, 4 Oct 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 6, Folder J.

⁶⁵ Sterling A. Brown to Charles S. Johnson, 7 Oct 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 6, Folder J.

⁶⁶ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

⁶⁷ George P. Rawick, *The American Slave : A Composite Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979).

interviews, the value of the accounts as historical records remains. As Brown commented in 1979, we

figured that we would like to get the inside story from the ex-slaves and we knew they'd be lying but a whole lot of truth appears in folklore, in lies.⁶⁸

Africanisms – Brown's Objections to *Drums and Shadows*

Mary Granger, the District Supervisor of the Georgia Writers' Project, supervised the interviewing of ex-slaves amongst the isolated black population within the Sea Islands along the Georgia coast. Her focus was far narrower than that recommended by Brown and much closer in intention to John Lomax's conservative perspective on folk culture as fast approaching extinction. She believed in the existence of African survivals and her research focused entirely on this area. Mary Granger's advisers for *Drums and Shadows* were Guy B. Johnson and Melville Herskovits, two scholars with very different perspectives on whether African retentions existed in the Savannah area of Georgia. Granger was convinced that the Gullah dialect spoken there and the ways of life that she believed had travelled from Africa (for example, woodcarving, superstitions and religious beliefs), would die out when modernisation took hold and her aim was to gather evidence before it was too late. Her study encountered strong opposition from Sterling Brown.

In general, Granger's view was not in vogue in the period either among conservatives or liberals. Southern historians such as Ulrich Phillips wrote history from a white supremacist perspective and ignored or disparaged the culture and history of slaves and their descendants. Northern sociologists, particularly the influential Robert E. Park at Chicago, were equally dismissive of any notion that African cultural traits had survived into the twentieth century.⁶⁹ African American intellectuals ranged from cautious to suspicious in their thinking about possible cultural survivals from Africa. In the 1920s,

⁶⁸ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

⁶⁹ Peter H. Wood, "Review of *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, Reissued with an Introduction by Charles Joyner, 1986," *Southern Changes* 8, 3 (1989): 21-24.

white Americans' interest in African art, music and dance was coupled with a voyeurism that depicted blacks as 'other' and 'primitive', a glamorous alternative to the constraints of an increasingly regimented and bureaucratic society. As Brown pointed out, it ignored the reality of the everyday strengths and struggles of African Americans. In 1931, E. Franklin Frazier, who trained under Robert Park at Chicago, argued

our present knowledge of the conditions under which slavery was established in America leads us to believe that the Negro was completely stripped of his social heritage in the process.⁷⁰

Historian Robert Hall argues that from the 1920s Frazier was battling with the established idea that "there was some kind of innate 'racial' temperamental endowment of the Negro peoples that operated despite varying environmental conditions and racial cultural discontinuity." Fighting so-called 'scientific' racism, Frazier feared that an acceptance of the existence of African survivals "perhaps unwittingly, left room for pseudoscientific racism to rush in through the back door".⁷¹

Sociologist Guy B. Johnson argued in *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930) that the Gullah dialect was not a survival from Africa as the conditions of slavery and the way the slave trade operated mitigated against that. Instead, Gullah was a remnant of the English of the colonial period, which had been maintained due to the geographical and cultural isolation of the Sea Islands. Johnson also found many similarities between black spirituals and the religious songs of American whites and believed that black spirituals were modifications of white music, rather than a unique creation.⁷² Melville Herskovits, an anthropologist who had studied under Franz Boas at Columbia, was of the opposite view. Herskovits followed Boas's example of moving the discipline of anthropology away from hierarchical biological classification towards individual case studies based on empirical

⁷⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, "The Changing Status of the Negro Family," *Social Forces* 9, 3 (1931): 386.

⁷¹ Robert L. Hall, "E. Franklin Frazier and the Chicago School of Sociology: A Study in the Sociology of Knowledge," in *E. Franklin Frazier and Black Bourgeoisie*, ed. James E. Teele (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 47-67.

⁷² Charles S. Johnson, "Book Review : *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island*, Guy B. Johnson," *American Journal of Sociology* 40, 6 (1935): 848-49.

data gathered in the field.⁷³ In 1930, Herskovits set out the problems that the anthropologist must grapple with as he saw them, namely, what was “the effect of environment on human types?” and what happened to the language and culture of a race of mankind when placed in a very different environment:

when an aboriginal culture is vigorously suppressed, will anything remain in spite of everything? Will there be any residuum so subtle that only painstaking research will bring it to light?⁷⁴

Herskovits's studies of African descendants in the New World and comparison to communities in Africa led him to the view that there were many survivals. Furthermore, he felt that investigation and understanding of African survivals could improve race relations in the United States.

Brown met Granger in the summer of 1936 and provided some feedback on the first draft of *Drums and Shadows* later that year. He had objections to the manuscript, as did Henry Alsberg. Conscious that he had limited knowledge about African retentions, Brown passed Granger's manuscript to E. Franklin Frazier and another colleague W. O. Brown at Howard who also had criticisms. Brown recommended to Granger that she should seek guidance from Melville Herskovits and Guy B. Johnson. Brown received a revised manuscript in the summer of 1939, when:

Congress had laid the axes to the roots [of the FWP], and the toppling and cracking did not allow much time for careful criticism of ‘Survivals in Coastal Georgia.’

Brown's view, as given to Samuel Y. Tupper, Georgia State Director, was that it was impossible to prove that the customs described by Granger were of African origin.⁷⁵ He provided detailed criticism to Granger in August 1939, at a time when the FWP was in some disarray, following the removal of Henry Alsberg, the appointment of a new director, J. D. Newsom, and heavy funding cuts to the Project. Although I was unable to obtain a copy of Brown's August letter to Granger, the substance of his evaluation of the manuscript is clear from subsequent correspondence on the matter. Brown felt that Granger's

⁷³ See discussion of Boas in chapter two.

⁷⁴ Melville J. Herskovits, "The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem," *American Anthropologist* 32, 1 (1930): 145-55.

⁷⁵ Samuel Y. Tupper to Sterling A. Brown, 26 Jan 1938, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51.

survivals were not unique to the area in question but were rather “widespread American and Negro American.” He believed that the book did an injustice to black Americans, to that “whole section and a large number of people who have many more things of equal and greater importance in their lives.” He worried that Granger had not provided sufficient evidence of the point of origin of survivals and that the FWP would be criticised for attempting to explore such a specialist area with an amateur staff team.⁷⁶

Brown wrote again to Granger and Tupper at the end of August 1939, suggesting a conference with Melville Herskovits and Guy Johnson would be helpful. He was not sure when it could happen because of uncertainty about the future of the national office; affairs at the FWP were in “a somewhat confused state.”⁷⁷ Herskovits wrote to him in September 1939, explaining that both he and his colleague at Northwestern University, William Bascom, had gone over the manuscript fairly thoroughly to check the treatment of ‘survivals’ and points of origin, and that he felt Granger had addressed most of Brown’s objections. In an uncharacteristically long and prompt reply, Brown wrote to Herskovits to outline that he continued to feel “an essential injustice or lack of balanced observation in the book,” that he had “misgivings about the total impact of the book” and that these were shared by other “intelligent and I do not think hypersensitive readers.” Although he deferred to Herskovits’ knowledge and authority - “it would be ridiculous arguing with you on a subject which is the field of your own major interest and industry” - he nevertheless clarified his objections. He wanted Granger to be clear about whether she was talking about Africanisms in this limited population or whether they were also found in the “wider Negro-American population;” in “controversial fields” such as “religious emotionalism,” he thought that references to other points of view would leave the book “less open to attack.”⁷⁸

By the end of October 1939, Brown and Johnson had “come to an agreement over *Drums and Shadows*.” Granger claimed to “understand perfectly”

⁷⁶ Melville Herskovits to Sterling A. Brown, 27 Sep 1939, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Series 35/6, Box 4, Folder 18.

⁷⁷ Sterling A. Brown to Mary Granger, 31 Aug 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51.

⁷⁸ Sterling A. Brown to Melville Herskovits, 2 Oct 1939, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Series 35/6, Box 4, Folder 18.

Brown's reaction to the "apparent instances of survivals." Somewhat patronising, she claimed: "I absolutely agree with you that they play a small part in total life, but we can't do a picture of the total life!" She subsequently promised to make more emphasis in the introduction to the "the relation of these survivals to the total background."⁷⁹

Her final introduction to *Drums and Shadows* (1940) tried to address some of Brown's concerns. In it, she stated:

no attempt has been made to give a cross section of the Negro scene as a whole, but only that part of it which would seem to indicate the survival elements. This limitation of the field necessarily concentrates this study on the more primitive aspects of a comparatively small group of persons and ignores a large section of the Negro population whose interest and point of view are vastly different.⁸⁰

When Brown criticised "an essential injustice or lack of balanced observation in the book," he was alluding to the stereotypes that proliferated within it. The source of Brown's misgivings about the "total impact of the book" are evident from its very opening in the black section of Old Fort in north eastern Savannah where "life goes on serenely for days and months" until

suddenly, as it happened only a short time ago on a calm sunny morning, a woman is stabbed in the back and left writhing on the pavement to die before a swiftly gathering crowd.

This is the reader's introduction to the superstitious ways of the Savannah black community where terrified onlookers whisper among themselves that "conjure" was the cause of death for "despite all efforts to remove the knife it remained firmly embedded in the victim's back." The focus of this chapter is on superstitions: 'ghoses' (ghosts), 'cunjuh' (conjure), and witches.⁸¹ Murder is also the focus in the Pinpoint chapter where four pages are devoted to the "Bo-Cat Murder" of 1937, when on Friday 13th a man killed his wife and

⁷⁹ Mary Granger to Sterling A. Brown, 26 Oct 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51.

⁸⁰ Georgia Writers Program, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), xix.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1-11.

dumped her body “near Hell Gate.”⁸² Thus the reader has to question whether a noted survival of Africa is sudden violence, fuelled by illogical superstition.

Brown particularly objected to the inclusion of descriptions of the religious ceremonies of Father Divine and of Daddy Grace in the area. Father Divine was a religious leader of the Peace Mission movement, who preached a message of equality and interracial harmony. Although he was based in Harlem from about 1915, he was reportedly born in Savannah, Georgia and at the time of the FWP study, there were about fifty members in the area. It is likely that Brown found the descriptions of their ceremonies hard to stomach, for example:

The participants in the dance seem delirious to everything except the series of contortions in which they are indulging. Eyes half closed, fixed smiles on their faces, every muscle in their bodies aquiver, they stumble blindly into the wooden benches, others fall exhausted to the floor. Still the dance goes on.

A similar sort of passage is provided to describe Daddy Grace, where the congregation dance to the drum’s “steady throb” whilst the:

... singing and dancing becomes wilder and more abandoned... The muscles of their bodies twitching convulsively, they continue in their dance.⁸³

The writing is similar to the most voyeuristic descriptions of Harlem cabarets in the 1920s and the implication was that these ‘wild’ ceremonies reduced African Americans to mindless, animalistic, primitive creatures without control.

Brown suggested to Granger that she could compare religious revivals in Georgia and Harlem and look at both poor black and white practises, enabling a more accurate assessment on the significance of the Georgia material. Presumably Brown was keen to show that this type of religious expression was common to many poor Americans in urban as well as rural settings, white as well as black. Granger replied that they could not do that:

⁸² Ibid., 84-88.

⁸³ Ibid., 8-11, 48-49.

We are not in Harlem to study and make the comparisons worth anything nor are we in a position to study the cracker material. It was at Prof. Brown's own instigation that we deliberately stayed out of the comparative field.⁸⁴

In response to Brown's criticisms about Father Divine and Daddy Grace, Granger offered to omit the material but it did appear in the final published version. Herskovits failed to respond to Brown's misgivings; he failed to recognise the jaded stereotypes about African Americans which Granger repeated.

As Charles Joyner points out in his introduction to the 1986 edition of *Drums and Shadows*, the FWP team collected useful information on a range of topics: drums, signs, conjure, beliefs, charms, words, markings, superstitions, basket making, river baptisms, and wood carvings.⁸⁵ However, the religious material is an extreme example of the attitude to African American as 'other' that runs throughout the book. Some individuals were co-operative in response to the FWP team's questions; these were described generally like James Collier in Brownville, who was a "middle-aged, intelligent, well-educated Negro..." Equally in Pinpoint, they chatted with "a pleasant, intelligent woman of about 45." However, there is very little content of this nature as a proportion of the book's overall wordage. And, where African Americans were less co-operative, they are described very harshly. At Sunbury, as the writers travelled along a dirt road:

... our attention was attracted by a stout, middle-aged woman who was sitting on the porch idly playing with a long, dangerous looking knife... Near the woman was seated the husky figure of a young girl. She wore but one garment, a faded green dress which hung raggedly to about the knee. Beneath the skirt were large muscular legs that were twisted about the rungs of the chair. Long, staring yellow eyes looked out at us with disturbing, unblinking fixity. The girl's hair stood out stiffly in a number of tight little braids.

The young girl said little to them but the woman initially spoke about baptisms, food, dancing to drums, roots, conjure, and witches. Clearly, the

⁸⁴ Mary Granger to Samuel Y. Tupper, 22 Aug 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51.

⁸⁵ Charles Joyner, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), xii.

woman did not want the interaction with the writers for the interviewer noted that “after a time the older woman, too, sank into a heavy, unresponsive silence. When she answered our queries at all, it was with a flat, ‘No, ma’am, I ain nebuh heahd uh dat,’ or an exasperating, ‘Wut, ma’am?’”⁸⁶ The language used by Granger here reeks of violence, unknown danger, and a frightening physicality and otherness. Clearly too, we hear the expectation of the white interviewer that they will be greeted with deference and solicitude and the ‘exasperation’ of the interviewer when the response is otherwise.

Despite his well-evidenced articles about the African American and his declared commitment to improving race relations, Herskovits ultimately could not see why Brown objected so strongly to the book:

I wondered a little bit about your statement that the book does an injustice to the Negroes. It is ... a study of survivals, but I cannot see that this stigmatizes in any way the picture that is drawn nor do I see how any injustice is done to that ‘whole section and a large number of people who have many more things of equal and greater importance in their lives.’⁸⁷

Perhaps as he lived and worked in the South, Guy B. Johnson could understand more clearly Brown’s objections, and he noted that the book did not pretend to set out “a complete picture of the life and culture of these people, but limits its scope of inquiry to certain definite types.” He also pointed out that “thousands of white and Negro people in other parts of the United States” believed in ghosts, witches and conjure, this was not confined to the black communities of the Georgia Coast. Nevertheless, Johnson celebrated the Georgia Writers’ Project team for “what is probably the most thorough search for African heritages among Negroes in a small area that has ever been attempted in this country up to the present time.”⁸⁸

Historian Peter Wood praised the 1986 reissue of the book as “a pioneering work, however dated or patronizing some passages may seem.”⁸⁹ For Brown and his African American contemporaries, the book was racist, unscientific

⁸⁶ Georgia Writers Program, *Drums and Shadows*, 62, 83, 117-19.

⁸⁷ Melville Herskovits to Sterling A. Brown, 27 Sep 1939.

⁸⁸ Georgia Writers Program, *Drums and Shadows*, v-xvi.

⁸⁹ Wood, “Review of *Drums and Shadows*.”

and as Brown had said in relation to fictional stereotypes, could if published: “play into the hands of reactionaries, who, once a different position is established, use it to justify peculiar position and peculiar treatment.”⁹⁰ This is why, even in a period of considerable disruption to the project and many pressures on Brown, he refused for some time to allow the manuscript to proceed to print. He and Frazier were acutely aware that no matter what Granger or Johnson wrote in its introduction, it would be interpreted as ‘truth about the American Negro,’ rather than a small number of black Georgians, carefully selected by Granger and her interviewers. Not only was the picture painted of an isolated black community; it depicted people who were different to the point that they lacked humanity. It was filled with the sort of stereotypes that Brown had battled against for at least a decade. As Brown noted in a report to Botkin, it was “a hodge-podge of chit-chat and gossip, with leading questions and often misleading answers.”⁹¹

The Negro in Virginia

In November 1936, the Virginia FWP set up an all-black unit, under the leadership of Roscoe Lewis. Lewis was a chemistry professor at Hampton Institute with an increasing interest in race relations and sociology. Like Brown in Washington D.C., Lewis worked two jobs, he led the staff team producing *The Negro in Virginia* for two years whilst holding a fulltime academic post.⁹² At its height, the separate black unit employed sixteen members of staff. Its most important achievement was a study of Virginian blacks, which juxtaposed the accounts of ex-slaves against the wider historical context to deliver an innovative social history.

Jerre Mangione praised *The Negro in Virginia* as “a gold mine of black history and folklore which is widely regarded as a classic of its kind.” He described Roscoe Lewis, who led production of the book, as “a black scholar

⁹⁰ Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, 1-4.

⁹¹ Report by Sterling A. Brown to Benjamin A. Botkin, 1940, Federal Writers’ Project files, WPA records, Record Group 69, Box 201, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁹² Arthur Howe, “Praise for Roscoe Lewis,” *Newport News*, 21 Aug 1940.

who wrote well and who had excellent rapport with all the whites and blacks involved in the study.” He noted that Eudora Richardson, the state director, was

a southern lady of keen literary sensibility who, unencumbered by any racial bigotry, shared Brown’s and Alsberg’s resolve to make it a model for the Negro studies that would follow.⁹³

Richardson was undoubtedly a race liberal by the standards of the time. However, there was plenty of racial tension behind the scenes, even before the unit was established in November 1936. Following a meeting in September 1936 between Washington officials (Alsberg and Brown) and Virginia FWP staff (Director Dr Eckenrode and Mr Browning), Brown sent a personal letter to Roscoe Lewis. He noted that the Virginians:

agreed that there should be Negroes on the project – rather, on a project. They were agonizedly eager, however, that it be separate, and known as separate. Anglo-Saxon America undefined.⁹⁴

It may be that Mangione considered Richardson to be a liberal in comparison to the previous state director, Dr. Eckenrode, who was forced to resign by Alsberg in February 1937.⁹⁵ Eckenrode believed, like many apologists for slavery, that the slaves had not rebelled because “most of them were too well satisfied to do so” due to the “excellent type of slavery” that southern planters had developed. The slaves were “so well cared for” that “splendid specimens ... replaced the feeble, potbellied savages from the West Coast of Africa.”⁹⁶

In April 1937, Roscoe Lewis wrote a formal letter to Brown at the Federal Writers’ Project national office on I Street in Washington D.C. He reported that he had forwarded about a dozen interviews to Mrs. Richardson, the new State Director. In total, the FWP project based at Hampton Institute in Virginia had interviews with 62 African Americans and these included over fifty who were ex-slaves:

⁹³ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 259.

⁹⁴ Sterling A. Brown to Roscoe Lewis, 4 Sep 1936, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 6, Folder L.

⁹⁵ Nancy J. Martin-Perdue and Charles L. Perdue, *Talk About Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 429.

⁹⁶ Hamilton Eckenrode, “Negroes in Richmond in 1864,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*. 46, 3 (1938): 193-200. Cited in Virginia Writers Project, *The Negro in Virginia* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: J.F. Blair, 1994).

We feel that this kind of data is very valuable; there is possibly no better insight into the 'system' than that given by the story of it as seen through the eyes of those who suffered under it. With the years, its significance will become more apparent, and we feel justified in getting as much about it as possible.⁹⁷

Brown and Lewis wanted *The Negro in Virginia* to be a new kind of history, using the slave narratives alongside newspapers, books and other written historical sources to build a much rounder picture of history from 'the bottom up.' As an auxiliary project, the aim was also to include information that might be too controversial for the main State Guides, for example, on slave trading or ill treatment. Brown had managed to ensure controversial topics were included in the Washington D. C. Guide but this would not be feasible in Virginia.

Brown and Lewis's personal correspondence suggests a deep suspicion of the motives of some individuals involved with the Project. In April 1937, Brown warned Lewis that Washington was planning a single volume on the slave narratives:

So Alsberg wants a selected volumeLomax ... has horned in. I'll raise hell before I let a Texan edit slave narratives – though, to be just, Lomax has shown himself ready to include realistic grimness.⁹⁸

Brown worried in a letter to Lewis that Lomax did not know that Lewis had a recording machine. Clearly, Lewis did not want Lomax to know that he was gathering songs in Virginia for the Virginia project and he was protective of the material. Brown tried to mediate:

The gain is, of course, he can get, with his Library of Congress pull, a sort of immortality for these songs and sayings. The loss is that these are your finds, and your book should have first call on the best (and you should keep records of the finest). But your records won't go to the Library of Congress.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Roscoe Lewis to Sterling A. Brown, 20 Apr 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

⁹⁸ Sterling A. Brown to Roscoe Lewis, 12 Apr 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

⁹⁹ Sterling A. Brown to Roscoe Lewis, 8 Jun 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

The reality was that much of the material gathered by the Virginia black FWP unit was subsequently lost.¹⁰⁰

The first draft of *The Negro in Virginia* was submitted to Mrs. Richardson in summer 1937. She was of the opinion that the ex-slaves' stories "must be taken with the well known grain of salt that Mr Lewis is not administering". Her attitude was paternalistic, she commented: "I know the old Negro ... He is a creature of fine imagination who likes to tell his stories after a manner that will be pleasing to his audience."

She was concerned that the ex-slaves were not as old as they claimed and that they were telling stories that had been embellished through generations, as they were very young at Emancipation. She was incredulous that Lewis "apparently takes them in all seriousness," she thought that "the author makes himself ridiculous when he does not let the reader know that much that he is quoting should be discounted." Richardson also could not believe that slaves were not fed well and cared for properly. Noting that a "Negro slave" was valuable property like a "fine horse or a good hunting dog," she claimed that they would therefore be kept in "fit condition."¹⁰¹ Overall, Richardson's attitude to Lewis at this time was that he was out to produce propaganda for 'the Negro' and against the white race.

In February 1940, there was an exchange of letters between Newsom, who had replaced Alsberg as the National Director of FWP in August 1939, and Richardson. Richardson had received a memorandum from Newsom that, according to Lewis, highlighted "sections of slave narrative, references to miscegenation, Carter Glass and other good Virginians that, in his opinion, should be left out." Richardson had made the cuts, particularly to the "Thirty and Nine" chapter about slave punishments. She had removed Henrietta King's story of the appalling injury she sustained from "ole Missus" for stealing a piece of candy. The mistress held King down while her daughter whipped her with a rawhide and when the child "twisted 'way"

¹⁰⁰ Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat : Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, x.

¹⁰¹ Richardson to Alsberg, 27 Nov 1937, cited in Virginia Writers Project, *The Negro in Virginia*, xi.

ole Missus lif' me up by de legs, an' she stuck my haid under de bottom of her rocker, an' she rock forward so's to hol' my haid an' whup me some mo.

The rocker had crushed her facial bones, she was never again able to eat solid food, and was horribly disfigured for life “what chilluns laugh at an' babies gits to cryin' at when dey see me.”¹⁰² Lewis complained to Brown that he was appalled by the revised manuscript and that Arthur Howe, President of Hampton Institute, who was sponsoring the book, refused “with a very slight suggestion from me” to provide written approval of the new draft, as he had previously approved the slave material and “thought it was one of the most valuable features of the book.”¹⁰³ Although she initially considered the King story to be a “gross exaggeration,” Richardson did, after protests from Lewis, meet with King after which time she was convinced of the veracity of her story and it remained in the book.

Brown was no longer employed by the FWP from January 1940, but he continued to support Lewis as the book went through further editing. They were both concerned about the selection of photographs to accompany the text, Brown noting “the pictures have been changed etc. subtly, and I don't like it”:

The N.A.A.C.P. pictures, the leaders – P. B. Young et al., the Negroes learning to cut up a steer, the house with the wisteria, the Negro at work in the mines, etc. are left out of the new batch. Instead the cooks and maids and smiling Sams have multiplied.¹⁰⁴

Brown and Lewis were resisting Richardson's continuation of the minstrelsy tradition of depicting blacks as satisfied with their prescribed place in American society. Her selection of photographs for the book was symptomatic of the southern tendency to use stereotypes of contented domestic and agricultural black workers as part of a battery of tactics designed to control black labour.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid., 173-75.

¹⁰³ Roscoe Lewis to Sterling A. Brown, 20 Feb 1940, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

¹⁰⁴ Sterling A. Brown to Roscoe Lewis, 10 Apr 1940, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

¹⁰⁵ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 68.

The Negro in Virginia was published in June 1940 and was very positively received. It was on the Book-of-the-Month list in the same month. Southern liberal, Jonathan Daniels, described it as

free from both bitterness and prejudice and equally free of sentimentality and pretentiousness.... one of the most valuable contributions yet made to the American Negro's history, which has been left in darkness even when it was not presented in distortion...¹⁰⁶

There was some dispute about who should take the credit for the book. Richardson claimed in 1973 that she had to do the "final writing of the book" because the library at Hampton Institute was inadequate and the sources biased. The implication was that she did not consider Lewis's work to be reliable or thorough (although she had written to Alsberg in March 1938 to say how much she valued Lewis's work). Brown said in 1974 that he and Ulysses Lee edited the manuscript into its final form.¹⁰⁷ He repeated that assertion in 1979:

Eudora Ramsay Richardson says she wrote it. Now that I will tell you is not true. I had much to do with the final proportion of that book. She insisted on certain cuts but we left in much of the strong stuff.¹⁰⁸

The euphoria of publication did not last long for Roscoe Lewis. In August, he wrote to Brown of the difficulties he faced in sustaining his employment and that of his staff. He noted with some bitterness that Richardson felt that "Virginia has done far more for its Negro citizens than has any other state" and doubted that "its worthwhile to get any more money for the project. She's convinced that she's done right well by the Virginia Niggers."¹⁰⁹ His employment ended in October 1940. Nevertheless, the struggles that he and Sterling Brown had undergone in the face of state and national censorship were worthwhile because they succeeded in bringing to mainstream publication an innovative and informative history of African Americans in Virginia using techniques that would not be adopted by the historical profession at large until the 1970s.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Daniels, "History of the Negro," *Saturday Review of Literature* (1940): 15.

¹⁰⁷ Sterling A. Brown, personal communication to Charles L. Perdue cited in Virginia Writers Project, *The Negro in Virginia*, xii-xiii.

¹⁰⁸ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

¹⁰⁹ Roscoe Lewis to Sterling A. Brown, 25 Aug 1940, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

‘Toppling and Cracking’ - the Demise of the FWP

Although government support for the Federal Arts Projects was unprecedented, the Projects were never on secure ground. Staff in the national office of the FWP were aware from the outset that its position would be tenuous and seen by some Americans as frippery. The *Washington Post* was less than enthusiastic:

a mixture of naïveté and idealism ...sloppy experimentalism ... they carry boondoggling to its utmost extremities... a motley group of 30,000 musicians, writers, actors, painters, sculptors, etc., is expected to supply the cultural deficiencies of American communities.¹¹⁰

In fact, the term ‘boondoggling’ originated in the 1930s as a description of federal relief projects seen as useless and was most often used in reference to the Arts Projects.¹¹¹ Alsberg recognised that most middle-class Americans were “unsympathetic, if not hostile, to the notion of the government becoming an employer of writers.”¹¹² It seemed that many voters disagreed with WPA Chief Harry Hopkins when he dismissed criticisms of the Arts Projects with a flippant comment: “Hell, they’ve got to eat just like other people.”¹¹³ There was a notion that art of lasting value would not be produced by providing an easy ride for those on relief, with the *Post* noting acerbically: “luxury and ease have been handicaps to creative effort.”¹¹⁴

As Brown struggled to liaise with FWP offices in 48 states, he and his colleagues at the national office were affected by constant anxiety about the future of the project. The frankness of some of the guidebook material led to charges of bias and left-wing distortion. The Project received adverse publicity. In August 1937, the *Washington Post* published Governor Charles

¹¹⁰ "Culture or Camouflage?," *Washington Post*, 9 Sep 1935, 6.

¹¹¹ James Stuart Olson, *Historical Dictionary of the Great Depression, 1929-1940* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), 41.

¹¹² Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 48.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁴ "Culture or Camouflage?," 6.

F. Hurley's demand for the dismissal of Federal writers who "maliciously besmirch the proud record of Massachusetts" in the state's guidebook. In an article titled "'Go Back Where You Came From,' WPA Writers Told", the paper described Hurley's anger at the "treatment of labor issues and the famous Sacco-Vanzetti case."¹¹⁵ As noted above, by 1939, concerns were raised in Congress about the influence of communism and publications that incited class conflict.

In a 1979 interview, Brown recalled the tremendous workload under which he labored. Howard University would not release him to the FWP:

I was teaching full load at Howard, and working down there in the afternoon. They wouldn't let me free at Howard to do it so I went down in the afternoon, worked my ass off.¹¹⁶

It may have been the case that he could not afford to work only on the FWP. At this time, he was on a two-year contract with the University and was paid an annual salary of \$2600. His summer school at Atlanta paid \$200 plus travel expenses, board and lodgings. The FWP paid "a salary of \$10.00 per diem while actually employed ... for emergency work not to exceed eighteen days per month."¹¹⁷ He complained of the pressure in a letter written early in 1937 to Joe Hill at Lincoln:

In addition to all the ills that composition teachers and directors of play fall heir to, I have this boondoggling administrative job which suits neither my disposition nor my abilities, two writing jobs for Alain Locke, and the finishing of another book, long overdue in New York.¹¹⁸

Locke's 'writing jobs,' assigned to Brown in June 1935, were part of an adult education series and comprised of two booklets, *The Negro in American Fiction* (referred to above) and *Negro Poetry and Drama*. Brown was in the final stages of editing the booklets by the summer of 1937. Some relief was in sight, as his application for a Guggenheim grant had been approved and he would be released from his teaching and FWP duties. After seventeen months

¹¹⁵ "'Go Back Where You Came from,' WPA Writers Told," *Washington Post*, 21 Aug 1937, 2.

¹¹⁶ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

¹¹⁷ Works Progress Administration to Sterling A. Brown, 1 Apr 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder H.

¹¹⁸ Sterling A. Brown to Joe Hill, 16 Mar 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 8, Folder First Names.

on the FWP from April 1936 to Sept 1937, he was free for a year from October 1937 to work on more personal and creative projects.

Brown was due to begin writing his novel under the auspices of the Guggenheim in October 1937. By mid November, he was still finalizing the Bronze Booklets and working on FWP publications and had not made a start on his novel.¹¹⁹ During the year that followed, letters still arrived with pleas for assistance on FWP matters, including black writers complaining about unfair treatment in their local office, and staff on the New York FWP complaining about political intrigue and upset there. The Project was receiving adverse publicity during 1938 as the Dies Committee on Un-American Activities considered whether the state guides “promoted class hatred” focusing particularly on the ways in which New Jersey and Montana guides described labour relations.

He returned to his teaching duties at Howard in autumn 1938 with very little of the novel completed. Keen to demonstrate that his year off had been productive, he searched for a publisher for his second collection of poetry, *No Hiding Place*. As noted in chapter two, his search was in vain. Although negotiations with Donald Elder at Doubleday Doran about the poetry would go until 1939, they would ultimately reject them. They were far more interested in his novel. Brown had released the few chapters of his novel that he had drafted to Elder who found them “very well-written, with excellent characterizations.” But Brown had not made enough progress on the novel to get any commitment from Doubleday Doran. Elder explained that he was unable to share the chapters with the editorial committee because there was insufficient copy to show them “the general form and shape of the book.”¹²⁰

The rise of European fascism and the increasing likelihood of a second world war radically altered the political emphasis in Washington and the focus moved from alleviating the impact of the Great Depression to preparation for war. The staff at the national office felt that the end was nigh. In January

¹¹⁹ Sterling A. Brown to Roscoe Lewis, 18 Nov 1937, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L.

¹²⁰ Donald B. Elder to Sterling A. Brown, 3 Mar 1939.

1939, Brown wrote to Eugene Kinckle Jones urging the National Urban League to “protest against the discontinuance, or even the retrenchment, of the Federal Writers’ Project.” He suggested letters from the League or connected individuals to the various Appropriations Committees and to individual congressmen and senators.¹²¹ On 3 April 1939, the President renamed the Works Progress Administration, the Works Projects Administration and made it a subsidiary to the Federal Works Administration. On 23 May, Colonel Harrington, the Head of WPA, informed the Woodrum committee that he would reduce employment on the Arts Projects and terminate federal control. In June, the Emergency Relief Act of 1939 shut down the Theater Project and provided permission for the other Arts projects to continue only under state control and if they could, by the end of September, find sponsorship of a minimum of twenty five per cent of the total cost of each state programme.¹²² The FWP, now renamed the Writers’ Program, surprised its critics by securing enough sponsorship to continue in all but two states.

Shortly before Colonel Harrington made public his intention to end federal control of the Arts Project, Brown returned to his role as National Editor of Negro Affairs in April 1939.¹²³ Harrington fired Henry Alsberg in May although Alsberg succeeded in getting an extension until 1 August to enable him to ensure that as many as possible of the state guides were published to the required quality standard. Following Alsberg’s departure, his successor, John Dimmock Newsom, reduced the Washington staff to nearly half its previous number, and for the “survivors of the Washington staff the summer of 1939 was one of depressing confusion.”¹²⁴ In August 1939, Brown’s old friend Charles Johnson wrote to him:

My dear Sterling, I have been very much disturbed by the threatened decentralization of the Federal Writers’ Project ... The disappointment is that the mass of materials you have assembled there cannot be promptly made available in books.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Sterling A. Brown to Eugene Kinckle Jones, 14 Jan 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 6, Folder J.

¹²² Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 330.

¹²³ Sterling A. Brown to Roscoe Lewis, 6 Apr 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 51, Folder L;

Sterling A. Brown to Melville Herskovits, 2 Oct 1939.

¹²⁴ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 21, 330.

¹²⁵ Charles S. Johnson to Sterling A. Brown, 22 Aug 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 10.

Brown's correspondence suggests that he was employed and significantly involved with the project from April 1939 through to his termination slip in January 1940 and beyond as he struggled to influence what would be published and become the legacy of the FWP.

Brown had proposed another important project as part of the FWP: *The Portrait of the Negro as American*. Although masses of material was gathered and can be found in the Library of Congress, the project never came to fruition. He described the aim of the book: to "produce the accurate picture of the Negro in American social history ... as a participant" rather than a problem. Brown noted that black Americans had "too seldom been revealed as an integral part of American life" and had instead received "specialised attention from social scientists" or been "neglected." In attempting to address the neglect, black historians provided an "overemphasis, and still 'separateness.'" Brown wished to create a portrait and to emphasis biographical information, both historical and current. It would include such figures as "York with Lewis and Clark"... "Harriet Tubman leading the slaves out of 'Egypt,'" and closer to the present day: "Joe Louis, Father Divine, Bojangles Robinson and the Scottsboro boys."¹²⁶ Crucially, ordinary people, "all of those who make up the mosaic of Negro life in America" would be depicted: "sharecroppers, factory workers, students, business men." Brown provided a list of twenty one chapter headings; part one surveying origins, slavery, the struggle for freedom and free blacks; part two covering black Americans' role in war, religion, labour, education, business, leisure, social circumstances, folk, music, literature, theatre, art, sports, and spokesmen.¹²⁷

Brown also proposed a single volume history of the anti-slavery movement "to synthesize the work of nineteenth century historians and present scholarship." In approach, it was ambitious: "use will be made of the journalism, oratory and fiction of the period, as well as of social and intellectual histories of antebellum America." Brown planned to review the accounts of travellers in the South, to include the efforts of black abolitionists

¹²⁶ See Introduction for Scottsboro 'boys.'

¹²⁷ Sterling A. Brown to Mr. Munson: Description of Writers' Project Activity Concerning the Negro, Undated., Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D. C.

and to mine the autobiographies, journals and speeches of men like Frederick Douglass and Samuel R. Ward. Brown was convinced that there was “a growing audience for literature about America’s past, for honest treatment of the march of democracy.” Although “American Negroes ... chafe nearly as much under the persistent neglect of the Negro in American history as in the occasional derision and disdain with which he is treated,” Brown pledged not to produce a “chauvinistic tract” but would pay attention to

The great services of white humanitarians, the cooperation between all workers for democracy whether white or black, Northerners or Southerners, foreigners or Americans.¹²⁸

This and two further projects, the *Bibliography of the Negro* and, a joint project with Botkin, *The Folklore of the Negro* also failed to reach fruition.

Conclusion

Brown’s enduring legacy in terms of the Federal Writers’ Project was in his challenges to official versions of American history and culture. Up to this point, white scholars in the main produced the official histories and cultural studies with a large readership. There were exceptions such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935) but their audience was limited. Brown had the opportunity to bring a critical eye to publications for a popular and wide readership and he took it very seriously. Black communities were visible in the majority of the State Guides and derogatory stereotypes, although still present in places, were minimized following Brown’s careful critiques.

Through the influence of Brown and his colleagues and allies, such as Roscoe Lewis and Benjamin Botkin, the ex-slave narratives and *The Negro in Virginia* mounted a strong challenge to official versions of life under slavery. In the 1990s, historians such as Sterling Stuckey could find evidence that

¹²⁸ Ibid.

slaves were able to fashion a life style and set of values – an ethos – which prevented them from being imprisoned altogether by the definitions which the larger society sought to impose.

The heated debate on Africanisms could evolve into an understanding that this

ethos was an amalgamation of Africanisms and New World elements which helped slaves, in Guy Johnson's words, 'feel their way along the course of American slavery, enabling them to endure...'¹²⁹

Historian Sklaroff remarks that the tight space available for debate across racial lines that took place during the FWP narrowed further with the advent of the Second World War. She sees the dialogue

concerning the persistence of racial stereotypes, the nature of artistic directorial authority, and the overall employment of African Americans in the culture industry ... to be as central to civil rights history as the racial politics that unfolded on the shop floor, in the armed forces, or within the legal system.¹³⁰

Sterling Brown was not celebrated for his contribution to civil rights history through his editorial and leadership role on the FWP. Neither was he better off financially: he left the FWP without any raise in status at Howard University and without any significant increase in income. He had left an enduring legacy in the FWP's published works but equally the books that he had failed to bring to publication frustrated him. The FWP had not helped him to find a publisher for his second poetry collection. His sense of responsibility to the FWP meant that he had made only limited progress on his novel during 1937 and 1938 when supported by a Guggenheim award. Though intensely proud of his achievements at the FWP in his later years, there is no doubt that in following the instruction given to him by his father, to be a leader for the race and to "initiate and direct the forces of men," Brown had spent much of the energy that he could have used to further his artistic calling.¹³¹ In negotiating for the race in what Sklaroff called "the tightest of cultural spaces," Brown paid a high personal price.

¹²⁹ Stuckey, *Going through the Storm*, 4.

¹³⁰ Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, xv.

¹³¹ Sterling N. Brown to Sterling A. Brown, 6 Jun 1927.

Chapter 4. Revealing the ‘Truth of Negro Experience’ - Sterling A. Brown’s role in the writing of *An American Dilemma*

Introduction

... the truth of Negro experience in America is strong enough propaganda for everyone. I think that the picture will not be one of unalloyed tragedy ... Truth to Negro experience must consider the Negro’s ability to take it, to endure and to wring out of life something of joy.¹

(Sterling A. Brown, “The Negro Author and his Publisher,” 1941)

American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.²

(*An American Dilemma*, 1944).

This chapter explores the development of the Carnegie Study of the Negro in America and Sterling Brown’s role in its production. Commissioned in the mid 1930s by the Carnegie Corporation, the study resulted in the publication in 1944 of *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, a lengthy scholarly analysis made possible by the contributions of the country’s major sociologists, economists and political theorists, black and white. Gunnar Myrdal, its principal author, highlighted the stark discrepancy between white America’s democratic values and its treatment of its African American citizens. Using a barrage of data, the study provided evidence that African Americans were discriminated against in every walk of life to the advantage of America’s white citizens.

In most descriptions of Brown’s career, his participation in the Carnegie Study of the Negro in America is cited alongside his other notable achievements. Joanne Gabbin notes:

¹ Sterling A. Brown, “The Negro Author and His Publisher,” *Quarterly Review of Higher Education among Negroes* 9 (1941): 146.

² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma : The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944), 928.

of all his unpublished work of the period, Brown's study of the "Negro in American Culture" is the most outstanding.... His critical and interpretive skills reached a high level in this study.³

His role in the study is often noted as "significant," and he is described as an "influential researcher on the project."⁴

From our present-day perspective, the importance and prestige of the project is difficult to convey. It had an enormous influence on scholars and the shapers of American social policy up to the 1960s. It was cited within the Supreme Court decision that legally ended segregation in the public schools in *Brown vs Board of Education* in 1954. On publication, the nation's leading critics acclaimed the book. It was widely read for an extremely lengthy (1483 pages) and scholarly text. With the demise of the Federal Writer's Project, the Carnegie Myrdal study opened up an alternative means for Brown to bring a positive vision of African American history and culture to a national audience.

However, readers searching for evidence of Sterling Brown's input will find few references to his work and little sense of his influence. The qualities that Brown had captured with precision in his previous writing - the strength and vitality of African American culture and the changing and evolving reality of everyday black life - were missing. The development of African American music, jokes and folktales was omitted. The creativity of African Americans and their active daily resistance to oppression were nowhere to be found. Thus, despite the involvement of many talented African Americans including Brown in its production, the story told within *An American Dilemma* was more 'unalloyed tragedy' than 'the truth of Negro experience in America.'

Although literary historians have written positively about Brown's contribution,⁵ I demonstrate below that his task – to produce detailed research memoranda on 'Negro culture' – was barely fulfilled and that his eventual submission was not up to the standard of his previous work. He did

³ Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 63.

⁴ Robert M. Farnsworth, "After Winter: The Art and Life of Sterling Brown (Review)," *American Studies* 49, 3 (2010): 297-98; "'The Story of Being Human,' Symposium Honors Poet Sterling Brown," *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* (1998).

⁵ Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, 63; Tidwell, "In Defense of African American Culture: Sterling A. Brown, Gunnar Myrdal and *An American Dilemma*," 209-33.

not deliver a full-length monograph on ‘the Negro in American Culture’ for publication as planned. His involvement with the project ended upon receipt of a dismissive letter from Arnold Rose, a 23-year-old graduate student from the University of Chicago, who eventually wrote the portion of the book that should have been one of the crowning achievements of Brown’s career:

I am returning the materials which you lent Dr Myrdal and me ... We found them very interesting and made good use of them, *although we decided not to give much space to the field of achievement and culture*” [emphasis mine].⁶

Historians have scarcely considered why African American culture was largely absent from *An American Dilemma*. Historian Walter Jackson dismisses the idea that Myrdal ever intended to incorporate a cultural analysis into his study, citing as evidence that Myrdal had no “ear for music” and was anyway far more interested in politics than literature.⁷ The evidence set out below suggests a more perplexing set of circumstances and attitudes affecting the treatment of African American culture within the study.⁸

Brown’s participation in the Myrdal study failed to affect its characterisation of African American culture, in terms of the historical and contemporary artistic output of black Americans. This combined with a negative portrayal of black culture in the wider sense of the ‘particular way of life’ of African Americans (for example, their family structures and behaviours, their educational, religious and civic institutions) meant that *An American Dilemma* was later criticised for portraying African Americans almost as inanimate objects negatively impacted by a racist society. Myrdal concluded as much when he wrote that:

the Negro’s entire life and, consequently, also his opinions on the Negro problem are, in the main, to be considered as secondary

⁶ Arnold Rose to Sterling A. Brown, 19 Dec 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder R.

⁷ Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience*, 131-32.

⁸ The term ‘culture’ is not clearly defined with *An American Dilemma* or in the work of later critics. Sometimes it is used to describe what Raymond Williams defines broadly as the “works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” including African American folk stories, songs and sayings (see Williams, *Keywords*, 90.) At other times the definition emanating from anthropology is used, to indicate the “particular way of life” of African Americans.

reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority.⁹

As novelist Ralph Ellison asked with incredulity:

But can a people ... live and develop for over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?¹⁰

By the 1960s, *An American Dilemma* was under attack for its optimism about the white majority's motivation to change a system from which it so strongly benefited. Myrdal was also criticised for failing to recognise the existence of a strong black subculture.¹¹ The study was perceived as a profound influence on Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial 1965 report "The Negro Family," which emphasised high levels of instability in the black family. He judged that the black family structure led to a cycle of unemployment and poverty, and that the root causes were the psychological and social damage inflicted by slavery.¹² Critics accused Moynihan of "blaming the victim,"¹³ and the backlash silenced white liberals who had believed that their work to expose the damage of slavery and segregation on black communities would advance black civil rights. Their silence empowered "archconservatives" such as George Gilder and Charles Murray to have "a field day explaining the ominous rise of the black underclass in terms of moral deficiency." There was also a political impact as stereotypes of dysfunctional and welfare-dependent black families influenced a wider public who turned en masse to the right, heralding the presidencies of Reagan and Bush Senior.¹⁴

Below I review the origins of *An American Dilemma* and the personnel central to its inception and production including Brown. I explore the

⁹ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, li.

¹⁰ Ralph Ellison, "An American Dilemma: A Review," in *Shadow and Act*, ed. Ralph Ellison (New York: Random House, 1958; reprint, Signet Books 1966), 301.

¹¹ Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White* (New York: Random House, 1964), 4-14; Oscar Handlin, "A Book That Changed the World," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 Apr 1963, 5, 26-27.

¹² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* ([Washington]: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1965). Moynihan was an Assistant Secretary at the Department of Labor.

¹³ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); Lee and William L. Yancey Rainwater, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass., London: M.I.T. Press, 1967).

¹⁴ David W. Southern, "An American Dilemma after Fifty Years: Putting the Myrdal Study and Black-White Relations in Perspective," *The History Teacher* 28, 2 (1995): 227-53, 41.

treatment of African American culture within the study and what beliefs and assumptions Myrdal's team, including Brown, brought to their research and writing. I argue that although Myrdal's approach to the 'Negro problem' was very different from Sterling Brown's, he was eager to understand Brown's perspective on African American culture and wanted to incorporate it within his analysis. It is my contention that Myrdal did not set out with a preconceived notion of African American culture as 'pathological.' There was a genuine opportunity for Brown's writing about the literature, music, folklore and "particular way of life" of black Americans to contribute to the overall argument of *An American Dilemma*. Had Brown succeeded in integrating his perspective on black life and culture into the book, social policy in the following decades may have been very different.

Ultimately, Myrdal and his staff, in attempting to shift the moral responsibility for the 'Negro problem' to the white majority, inadvertently reduced African Americans to the sole status of victims of their circumstances - social, economic, legal and political – and in the process denied the autonomy, strength and resilience of African American culture and communities. The central question of this chapter is why Brown, a powerful intellectual whose nuanced understanding of African American folklore and culture and its effect on the wider American culture had been widely celebrated in the 1930s, was rendered mute in the context of this study, a study that was to be influential for decades to follow.

Setting up the Study

In his foreword to *An American Dilemma* (1944), Frederick Keppel, President of the Carnegie Corporation Trustees, described the aims of the study, which were to disseminate knowledge and to gather information that could form a basis for future funding decisions. The Corporation had previously directed its resources mainly at southern education, until Board member Newton D. Baker drew their attention to the overcrowding, poor education, and unemployment in black communities in northern cities. As increasing

numbers of African Americans migrated from country to city, he worried about the social problems he thought they would unleash.¹⁵ Even though academics generally agreed by the 1930s that there was no scientific evidence that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites,¹⁶ many Americans were unconvinced. Baker was a southerner who believed that blacks were an “infant race,” unable to live side by side with whites in the northern cities, because of their uncivilised habits.¹⁷ Fears of riots and violent crime caused by greater African American mobility, coupled with an obdurate belief in African American inferiority prompted Carnegie to fund the study as much as a desire for increased knowledge.

The Carnegie Board members were anxious to commission an impartial and objective study. They believed a European from a country without an imperial history could deliver this and, after consideration, chose a Swedish economist, Gunnar Myrdal. Had the Board read Myrdal’s previous publications, they might have had reservations about whether he would be a dispassionate observer. His studies provided a theoretical justification for Social Democrat Party policies on welfare reform. He and his wife Alva had published a bestselling study of the Swedish population problem in 1935, advocating a range of radical steps that were necessary to rectify the situation. Myrdal was, in reality, a committed social engineer, who believed it was his moral responsibility to attempt to bring about change through his research.¹⁸

In keeping with the Board’s wish for an objective study, most of the personnel employed by the study took a scientific and quantitative approach. Chicago-trained sociologists were prevalent. Chicago sociologist William Ogburn wrote in 1928 of a “scientific sociology” interested only in “discovering new knowledge” to be presented without “interpretation, popularization, and emotionalism.”¹⁹ These attitudes dominated American sociology in the period leading up to the study, displacing the activist reformist model of sociology

¹⁵ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, vi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

¹⁷ Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge : The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 127-29.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 73, 75-79, 94.

¹⁹ Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible : The American Debate over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 48.

that had prevailed during the earlier Progressive Era. The Chicago School believed that the researcher should be a dispassionate observer and analyst; and his or her methodological approach should demonstrate the validity of the data, unaffected by personal or political views. Donald Young, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, carried out comparative studies of racial groups. He was opposed to scholars who might bring subjectivity or bias to their studies.²⁰

Chicago's Robert E. Park was the leading race relations' expert of the period. He trained many of the sociologists involved in the Carnegie Myrdal study, including Guy B. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson. As discussed in chapter one, Park believed in a slow cycle of race relations that should be researched methodically; he dismissed any notion that social scientists should attempt to guide government policy or planning.²¹ Although Myrdal was more of an activist than America's leading sociologists and disparaged their 'do-nothing school of sociology,'²² he was nevertheless determined to produce a study that would be accepted as a valid and objective assessment of the state of American race relations.

Another influential school of sociology of this period was based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, under the leadership of Howard Odum. Chapel Hill sociologists gathered statistics on southern life to demonstrate the impact on the whole region of economic backwardness, outdated agricultural practices, and substandard education. As noted in chapter two, Odum avoided racial comparisons, in part because he did not wish conditions in the South to be blamed on the racial rather than the economic.²³ However, by the outset of the Myrdal Study, Odum was fearful of technological innovation and the capacity of Southern society to absorb its impact and he became increasingly conservative, particularly in terms of race

²⁰ Robert C. Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism : The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 215-20.

²¹ Anthony J. Cortese, "The Rise, Hegemony, and Decline of the Chicago School of Sociology, 1892-1945," *The Social Science Journal* 32, 3 (1995): 235-54.

²² Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 127, 92.

²³ Rodgers, "Regionalism and the Burdens of Progress," 7, 15-16.

relations.²⁴ Myrdal intended to make explicit comparisons in relation to the differential treatment of black and white Americans, in economics, politics, education, employment and social institutions, and he knew this would be in direct opposition to Odum's prudent regionalist approach. He neutralised the tension by emphasising his conservative reform credentials at a speech to the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta in 1939,²⁵ and by bringing Odum's second in command at Chapel Hill, Guy B. Johnson, on to the core team.²⁶

Myrdal marshalled an notable roster of personnel to serve as his core team. These included sociologist Dorothy S. Thomas, and Swedish statistician Richard Sterner, both of whom had previously worked with Myrdal in Sweden; sociologist Guy B. Johnson, as well as Harvard educated economist Paul Norgren. There were two African Americans within the core team: educator Doxey Wilkerson and political scientist Ralph Bunche, both from Howard University. Other key influencers were sociologists Thomas J. Woofter (a white southerner), Donald Young (president of the Social Science Research Council), and John Dollard (a white psychologist). This group attended the first staff conferences at which the study was debated from 23-28 April 1939. Charles S. Johnson, then the leading African American sociologist and Head of Social Sciences at Fisk University, was also present. In addition to his core team, Myrdal also employed 32 paid advisers to realise his plan.²⁷

Myrdal selected an impressive group of African American scholars for the project. As well as hiring Bunche and Wilkerson as part of the core team, Myrdal asked Charles S. Johnson to produce a monograph.²⁸ Sterling Brown's friend Allison Davis was also hired. Following his studies for a Masters in Anthropology at Harvard in 1931, Davis and his wife Elizabeth carried out extensive research in Mississippi on class and caste, in partnership with white anthropologists Burleigh and Mary Gardner. Davis subsequently taught at

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁵ Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 108.

²⁶ A-0345: Oral History Interview with Guy B. Johnson, 22 Jul 1990. Southern Oral History Program (#4007).

²⁷ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, x-xi.

²⁸ See chapter one for further discussion on Bunche, Frazier and Johnson.

Dillard University in Louisiana for five years. In 1942, he would be awarded a PhD in Anthropology by the University of Chicago.²⁹ St Clair Drake was a younger black anthropologist who had studied under Davis at Hampton Institute and researched alongside him in Natchez, Mississippi. They were to write about the black church; Davis on the South, Drake on Chicago. E. Franklin Frazier's involvement was peripheral at the outset of the project, because he was about to publish his study on the black family, but his role grew in importance as the project progressed.³⁰ The Howard intellectuals - Bunche, Wilkerson, Frazier and Brown - believed that a greater emphasis on class and economics would lead to progress in the struggle for black equality.³¹ All of the black Americans involved in the study were interested in promoting racial equality, although they had different approaches to achieving that. However, unlike many white American intellectuals at the time, Myrdal demonstrated little concern that their radicalism would affect their input to the study.³²

At its inception, researchers knew that this study would be important as it had the potential to change people's understanding of the situation of the American Negro and to affect future decisions about what would be funded by the Corporation. Its genesis was in the Board's anxiety about social unrest. Impartiality and objectivity were a priority from the outset. This affected the Board's choice of Director and meant that most of the personnel employed took a scientific approach, and eschewed social activism. Myrdal employed virtually every leading social scientist in the country on the project. The black social scientists were well qualified for inclusion in the project but were aware that they were seen as less objective because most shared a left-wing political view and advocated activism to improve the status of black Americans.

²⁹ Michael R. Hillis, "Allison Davis and the Study of Race, Social Class, and Schooling," *Journal of Negro Education* 64, 1 (1995): 33-41.

³⁰ Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*, 95, 107.

³¹ Miller, *Born Along the Color Line*, 105-12.

³² Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 111. Myrdal recalled in later years that: "It's history's choice that the Negroes in the situation they were in, if they were intellectually advanced people, they were of course radical."

‘The Negro in American Culture’

Sterling Brown was 37 years old when he was asked to produce memoranda to support Myrdal in writing the book, and a monograph on ‘The Negro in American Culture,’ to be published at the expense of the Carnegie Corporation. Although he had a national reputation as a poet and frank critic of race relations, he had not produced a full-length analysis of black literature or culture and felt under pressure to do so. He wrote to Myrdal:

I promise to do a good memorandum, worthy of your confidence ... After all, besides contributing to this most significant ... study, this is a great chance for me to win my spurs in scholarship.³³

Brown’s career to date centred on undermining cultural stereotypes and revealing the resourcefulness of black Americans. His literary criticism demonstrated that cultural stereotypes were as powerful in subjugating black Americans as the legal and extralegal methods that Ralph Bunche and Arthur Raper would outline in their memoranda on racial inequalities in politics and the justice system.³⁴ Equally, his creative and critical writings expounded on the inventiveness of African Americans and how they expressed themselves in a unique black culture.

Brown stood out as the only poet and literary critic on Myrdal’s team,³⁵ but he held much in common with the other black scholars on the project. This included a shared belief in exposing the wider drivers of racial prejudice in terms of politics and economics and promoting working-class alliances. He wanted to be part of the team that could provide evidence beyond challenge that African Americans were subjugated within a system designed to keep them in a subservient role. However, his writing prior to the study demonstrated that he was far more interested in examining the ways cultural stereotypes functioned within the society to oppress blacks and how blacks used their intellects, their humour and their creativity as tools of resistance.

³³ Sterling A. Brown to Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, 6 May 1940, Gunnar Myrdal Papers, Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv, Stockholm.

³⁴ Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 81-91; Mazzari, *Southern Modernist*, 190-211.

³⁵ Memorandum on the Subject of ‘Letter to Sterling Brown,’ Gunnar Myrdal to Samuel A. Stouffer, 13 Sep 1941, Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America research memoranda collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Most of the Myrdal scholars had given little prior attention to African American culture. Some were simply not interested in African American practices, values or beliefs, expressed through religion, music, speech, art or literature. For example, Robert Park and Donald Young made comparisons of how different racial groups functioned and considered how social problems associated with race developed over time.³⁶ The scholars who were interested in African American culture were entangled in an acrimonious dispute about its origins. As discussed in chapter three, white anthropologist Melville Herskovits was at the forefront of those who believed that survivals from Africa formed the core of black American culture and that recognising these cultural survivals could lead to improved race relations.³⁷ He was commissioned to produce a monograph for the study, which would become *The Myth of the Negro Past*. His studies of African American culture since the 1920s,³⁸ convinced him that African Americans' "self image and self respect would be increased" if they understood and took pride in their African heritage.³⁹ Although some black scholars had made a similar connection to Africa, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, Herskovits dismissed them as propagandists who failed to provide solid evidence for their assertions. This was somewhat ironic, given that as a white scholar Herskovits had far easier access to funding for comparative fieldwork to prove his theories of continuity between African culture and that of black Americans. By contrast, black scholars struggled to obtain funding from research councils and philanthropic foundations, as they were judged (by white gatekeepers) to be unable to muster the required objectivity.⁴⁰

³⁶ Amongst the white academics associated with the study, John Dollard, whose *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* is discussed below, was probably the notable exception.

³⁷ Jerry Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 96. Herskovits had not been in favour of the study of the American Negro in isolation and believed that the Carnegie Foundation should have allocated its funding to international comparisons of cultures with African antecedents (such as those he carried out).

³⁸ Melville J. Herskovits, "Wari in the New World," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. 62 (1932): 23-37; "On the Provenance of New World Negroes," *Social Forces* 12, 2 (1933): 247-62.

³⁹ Jerry Gershenhorn in Llewellyn Smith, *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness* ([Berkeley, Calif.]: California Newsreel, 2009).

⁴⁰ Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*. See Herskovits's relationships with Woodson and Du Bois, 143-148. Herskovits received \$3,500 from Elsie Clews Parson and the same from Columbia University's Social Science Research Council in 1931 for a West Africa trip, \$1,300 for Haiti in 1934 from the Rockefeller Foundation, \$3,250 from the Carnegie Corporation in 1939 for a trip to Trinidad, and \$10,000 from Rockefeller in 1941-2 for an expedition to Brazil, 79, 81, 84, 86. On the feelings of black scholars,

Some black sociologists, like Charles S. Johnson, believed that differences between black and white Americans were due to different “physical and racial characteristics” and on different historical experiences in America, not on cultural differences coming from Africa.⁴¹ Ralph Bunche’s biographer Charles Henry notes that he was more comfortable with a sort of comparative sociology than with “immersing himself in the music, art and mythology of Africa.” Bunche believed that any differences between African American culture and the mainstream were due to the economic, political and social constraints on the black population in America.⁴²

Frazier vehemently denied any influence of African customs on black families and considered that “when the Negro was introduced into America the break with African culture was well nigh complete.” In his view, differences in culture or behaviour were due to influences during and after slavery, or associated with migration from rural to urban settings.⁴³ As discussed in chapter three, this was a reaction against earlier scholarship that had argued that Africans and African Americans were biologically inferior and their practices were rooted in the primitive state of their cultures. He feared that evidence that African Americans were different to other Americans would be used to bolster segregation and differential treatment. Equally, Frazier’s personality and values explain his position: he was a fiercely outspoken scholar who deplored in equal measure American racial injustice and “the Negro’s reluctance to measure up to national standards.”⁴⁴

This debate on African survivals became increasingly animated during the latter half of the 1930s. On the one hand, Herskovits argued that African survivals were common, should be celebrated and could increase racial pride. On the other, scholars such as Bunche, Johnson and Frazier argued that the culture of African Americans was rooted in their experiences in the United

note black historian Rayford Logan’s later comments that in this period “the word of one white man could determine whether a project concerning Negroes could be approved or not,” 156.

⁴¹ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 176.

⁴² Henry, *Ralph Bunche : Model Negro or American Other?* , 87-88, 119.

⁴³ E. Franklin Frazier, “The Negro Family,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (1928): 44.

⁴⁴ Davis, “E. Franklin Frazier (1894-1962): A Profile,” 429.

States and that their African heritage was largely an irrelevance. In a culture that continued to propagate stereotypical images of African Americans, the association with 'savage Africa' was incompatible with the drive of educated black Americans to demonstrate their parity with white Americans: intellectually, physically, spiritually and morally. Herskovits waxed eloquently about the benefits for racial self-esteem in valuing their African heritage but he refused to acknowledge that African American scholars considered the connection to be counterproductive to their wish to be accepted as American citizens.

As James McKee points out, both liberal white and black sociologists shared the desire to increase opportunities for black Americans but black sociologists had a particular understanding "that blacks did not want to disappear as a people."⁴⁵ Charles S. Johnson paid greater attention to the positive aspects of black culture than most white sociologists of the period. In *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934), he demonstrated the strengths of black family structures and noted, "the community tends to act upon the patterns of its own social heritage." He implied that the black community in Macon County had attitudes that were more humane than those of the general American society towards children born outside of marriage. Johnson's goal was assimilation but he situated this within a culturally pluralistic society, with the notion that black achievements and customs would add value and richness to the wider American culture.⁴⁶ He believed in the importance of black folk culture; that "the Negro on the plantation is the only peasant class America has produced, and his is the only native folk culture that America possesses."⁴⁷

Brown brought to the study his experience in exposing the political utility of negative stereotypes of 'the Negro' and in outlining the strengths of black culture. He was keen to deliver a strong contribution to the study. However, from the outset he was isolated as the only 'literary man' on the team and the sole scholar with a deep understanding of the way black American culture

⁴⁵ James B. McKee, *Sociology and the Race Problem : The Failure of a Perspective* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 216-18.

⁴⁶ Gilpin and Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson : Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, 129, 74.

⁴⁷ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 176.

functioned and developed. The majority of the project team was uninterested in the music, speech, folk tales or folk ways of black Americans. Herskovits was the noted exception but he was insensitive to the political implications of his theories on African survivals in a mainstream culture that still categorised black Americans as 'exotic' and 'other.' Among the black scholars, Charles S. Johnson was probably the closest in approach to Brown in seeing and documenting the strengths in black family life and folk culture and in seeing black Americans "as an integral part of a single tradition and as a unique collective experience" within American culture as a whole.⁴⁸

Myrdal's Understanding of the "Moral Dilemma"

When Myrdal arrived in the United States with his family in September 1938, he was convinced that the crippled economy of the South was at the heart of 'the Negro problem.' He embarked upon a two-month tour of the South where he met teachers and college professors, factory and farm owners and workers, politicians, police officers, and journalists. He travelled with Jackson Davis, a "cautious reformer," and he did not meet southerners with what would have been considered 'radical' views, for example, labour activists or those advocating a swift end to segregation. This may be one reason why Myrdal would take a further southern tour the following year with Ralph Bunche as his guide.⁴⁹

Myrdal came to see that the position of black southerners was fixed during slavery and perpetuated after the Civil War by the southern agricultural system of sharecropping and the crop lien system. His access to education and employment was limited and he was deprived of political and legal equality. This subjugation profited whites and they had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Myrdal became convinced that there was a "moral dilemma" for white Americans. They held a set of democratic values (what Myrdal called the American Creed of "liberty, equality, justice, and fair

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, ix; Henry, *Ralph Bunche : Model Negro or American Other?* , 94.

opportunity for everybody”) that could not be reconciled with their actual treatment of the black citizen in “depriving him of civic rights and human independence.”⁵⁰ He concluded that Americans would not perpetuate a system indefinitely that denied African Americans equal rights and opportunities.⁵¹

His emphasis was on the practical and ideological means by which white Americans perpetuated the treatment that benefited themselves and trapped African Americans in an inferior position. Thus economics, leadership, politics and social inequality were given the most thorough exposition within his study. As a trained economist, Myrdal felt most at ease in demonstrating the inequality of the United States’ economic arrangements as they affected blacks. He demonstrated how the Great Depression and overproduction affected southern blacks; and the agricultural reforms of Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, accompanied by global trends that reduced demand for American tobacco, sugar cane, and particularly cotton, compounded the problems of black farmers.⁵² He made many references to the memoranda of his Swedish associate Richard Sterner and those of T. J. Woofter and Arthur Raper within the text, as well as to Charles S. Johnson’s work.⁵³

The four memoranda produced by Ralph Bunche provided the essence of Myrdal’s chapters on leadership and politics.⁵⁴ However, there was a crucial point of disagreement. Influenced by John Dollard’s study of caste and class in Indianola, Mississippi, Myrdal was interested in the ways that the caste system set out expectations on the behaviour of each race, brought rewards for all parties and minimised conflict. Whites derived gains in sexual and economic status from the southern system of segregation and lower class blacks also obtained certain (lesser) benefits from maintaining the system,

⁵⁰ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, xlv-xlvi.

⁵¹ Handlin, “A Book That Changed the World.”

⁵² Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 205-428. “Part IV Economics.”

⁵³ Ibid. See citations on 1477, 1482, and 1459. Charles S. Johnson produced *Patterns of Negro Segregation* as a monograph, and Myrdal also frequently cited the earlier *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) and *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941).

⁵⁴ Henry, *Ralph Bunche : Model Negro or American Other?*, 95-116. The memoranda were “The Political Status of the Negro,” “Conceptions and Ideologies of the Negro Problem,” “Extended Memorandum on the Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations,” and “Brief and Tentative Analysis of Negro Leadership.”

notably in greater sexual freedom than the whites by virtue of their exclusion from middle-class mores.⁵⁵ Myrdal believed that Bunche put too much emphasis on class.⁵⁶ This put him in opposition to most of the black scholars on the project including Frazier and Brown.⁵⁷ Even Charles S. Johnson, generally portrayed as more conservative than the Howard scholars, believed that black and white workers were discovering shared class interests. He saw “a progressive shifting of these racial relations, notably in the South, from a castelike structure to a class organization.”⁵⁸ Myrdal believed that this ignored the racism of white workers, and his emphasis was on providing indisputable evidence of unfair treatment, which he believed would shame white Americans into improving the status of black citizens.

It is difficult to say what black scholars made of the section of *An American Dilemma* that focused on ‘the Negro community’ because with the exception of Wilkerson (who criticised the lack of emphasis on class),⁵⁹ the black participants did not comment on the book after publication. When Myrdal returned to Sweden in September 1942 and the project was officially closed, Arnold Rose, a fairly inexperienced sociologist, compiled “The Negro Community” section.⁶⁰ Chapter 44, “Institutions” covered the family, the church, education and voluntary associations. Chapter 45 was called “Non-institutional aspects of the Negro community,” and addressed a curious mixture of contrasting topics: “‘peculiarities’ of Negro culture and personality,” crime, mental disorders, suicide, and finally, nestling amongst the pathologies, “Negro recreation and achievements.”

The section on the family was brief and relied heavily on Frazier’s recently

⁵⁵ Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 62-97.

⁵⁶ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 182-83.

⁵⁷ Allison Davis and St Clair Drake were probably the exceptions to this as they did subscribe to the caste and class theory.

⁵⁸ John T. Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 159.

⁵⁹ Doxey Wilkerson, introduction to Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro People in America: A Critique of Gunnar Myrdal's 'An American Dilemma'* (International Publishers, 1946). Cited in Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 258.

⁶⁰ It appears that Myrdal would have preferred Samuel Stouffer to write this section. He had acted as project director during Myrdal’s earlier absence in Sweden (May 1940 to March 1941). Guion G. Johnson recalled that “Arnold Rose was young and was willing to do the hard work, grubby work, necessary to the production of the manuscript,” whereas Sam Stouffer “had a good job.... and was interested in his own research, did not want to do the leg work that was necessary.” See G-0029-3: Interview with Guion Griffis Johnson, 28 May 1974. Southern Oral History Program (#4007).

published *The Negro Family in the United States*.⁶¹ Frazier had concluded that black family structures were different to those of other American families because of slavery, its aftermath and more recently the effects of urbanisation.⁶² He emphasized that many black families valued and maintained marital stability and strong family units but were, in general, more disorganized than white families in terms of sex outside of marriage, illegitimacy, and broken homes. However, neither Frazier nor Myrdal described rural black families as pathological.

Drawing on both Frazier's and Charles S. Johnson's studies, Myrdal argued within *An American Dilemma* that black communities had a healthy model of family life. In relation to families living in the cities, Myrdal accepted that there were lower rates of marriage but noted that this was partly because of the number of common law marriages and the lower stigma in relation to divorce and illegitimacy. There were few unwanted children. Myrdal did not comment on any possible psychological effects on children of growing up in matriarchal families, thus he avoided an area that would become highly controversial in future decades. Myrdal ignored "the question of personality damage resulting from prejudice and discrimination" that would later become so pervasive. It was in the later publications of both black and white liberals that this would become a feature as they used the notion of 'damage' to lobby against segregation.⁶³

In relation to the church, voluntary 'helping' organisations and black schools, the Rose/ Myrdal analysis of each started with the premise that settlers in America had adopted "the cultural forms of America," hence assimilation to a normative culture became "a central element in the American creed." Segregation impeded assimilation to the norm leading to the establishment of separate institutions such as churches and schools. The cursory analysis of the black churches in *An American Dilemma* concluded that they acted to prevent blacks from challenging the caste system. As Davis pointed out, black religious leaders were dependent on white benefactors for their personal

⁶¹ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 927-94, 30-35.

⁶² Frazier, "The Negro Family," 44.

⁶³ Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 54-56.

security and southern whites exploited this to enforce segregation.⁶⁴ In exposing the way that black churches encouraged accommodation to a system that was overtly against the interests of the black population, rather than in the church as a vehicle of cultural expression and resistance, Davis and Drake minimised the positive aspects of black culture.⁶⁵

Hence, little consideration was given to the positive aspects of black education and religion. Myrdal saw black Americans as “akin to other Americans,” and claimed that they were “not proud of those things in which he differs from the white American.” The notion that black Americans had a culture they valued and wanted to retain was not considered. Interest in African heritage was merely reactive, a reaction to the label of racial inferiority put upon the race by white supremacists, but also a response to the encouragement of white people. Myrdal concluded that African American culture was “a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.”⁶⁶ This statement appears to define black culture as abnormal, a malfunctioning of the overall American culture.

Myrdal used the terms ‘pathology’ or ‘pathological’ frequently within the book. He used the term to mean diseased or abnormal when he discussed public health; African Americans needed education so that they could care for the body “in both its normal and its pathological state.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, he described the economic situation of black Americans as “pathological” by which he meant that outside of a tiny minority, members of the race lived in poverty, with little capital and without financial security therefore, “their entire culture and their individual interests and strivings are narrow.”⁶⁸ The term here emphasises a deficit: because of poverty, black American lives are constrained to the point where their expressive culture and their ambitions are restricted.

⁶⁴ Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 249-56.

⁶⁵ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 709-926, 27-56. “Part IX Leadership and Concerted Action” and “Part X The Negro Community.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 927.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 174.

Myrdal repeatedly used the term ‘social pathology.’ He noted that blacks had been “a poor, segregated group showing many signs of social pathology ...”⁶⁹ He warned that poor housing conditions would have an impact on various indicators of social pathology such as “destroyed home life, mounting juvenile delinquency.”⁷⁰ As Scott points out, in the Progressive Reform era, there was an assumption that society should aid the individual in distress but their problems were considered to result from “his or her failure to adjust to society’s norms.” In the inter-war years, this view had changed and “many experts held that a sick society produced sick people.”⁷¹ When Myrdal wrote of “social pathology,” he meant that the societal structure was ‘sick,’ rather than that black Americans themselves were ‘sick’ or ‘damaged.’

Contrary to later criticisms of Myrdal, Scott demonstrates that he did not argue that black people were psychologically damaged or that their cultural practices were diseased or abnormal.⁷² Myrdal’s acceptance of the caste system meant his gaze was continuously drawn away from black agency to focus on whites’ perspectives and behaviour. His intention was to examine how blacks’ worlds were structured, their ideologies, leadership, organisations, culture and accomplishments and “Negro social pathology,” but he claimed, “we shall continue to meet the same determinants.” Myrdal believed that because the caste system, controlled by whites for their own benefit, decisively affected the nature of black lives, “social pathology” could not be explained in terms of black agency or action. Their behaviour was a reaction to white treatment of the race: “the Negro problem is primarily a white man's problem.”⁷³

Neither Arnold Rose, the young sociologist compiling these chapters, nor Myrdal, who retained overall editorial control, had much to say about African American cultural achievements.⁷⁴ There was no trace of Sterling Brown’s

⁶⁹ Ibid., 205.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 430.

⁷¹ Ibid., 626.

⁷² Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 20.

⁷³ Ibid., 21-31.

⁷⁴ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 667-69. Rose relied somewhat on Frazier for his chapter on “Non-institutional aspects of the Negro community,” for which Frazier provided an “uninspired, empirical survey” on recreation and amusement.

influence on the text. The vibrancy of African American culture, the autonomy and creativity of African Americans, and the ways in which their culture served as a shield in a setting of pervasive oppression were omitted. There was no analysis of the complexity of the debates about black culture and the ways in which it functioned in African American life. Although Scott is correct in his conclusion that Myrdal did not blame black communities for creating a pathological culture that damaged personalities, the study nevertheless implied that black Americans had no culture of value. Without a strong advocate for the resilience and agency of black Americans as demonstrated by their own distinctive culture, *An American Dilemma* left readers with little context for the oft-to-be-repeated statement that black culture was “a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.” Their culture was merely the result of the oppression and exploitation exercised upon them over hundreds of years.

Myrdal’s Intentions

In part, Myrdal’s neglect of African American culture within the text was due to his tendency to emphasise the political, social and economic structures that perpetuated racial inequality, rather than the meaning and significance of culture as a means of resisting oppression and a way of protecting self and community. Historian Walter Jackson goes further to claim that Myrdal was “deeply suspicious of Negro ideologies that exalted Afro-American culture and race pride,” and had no commitment to this part of the study. Acknowledging that Brown had a “subtle understanding” of black folklore, Jackson believes that this “was lost on” Myrdal. Jackson and David Southern also apportion some blame to Sterling Brown, noting that he failed to deliver on his commitments to the study on time.⁷⁵ Below I examine these claims and consider what Brown wrote and why his writing could not influence *An American Dilemma*.

⁷⁵ Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*, 107.

The evidence contradicts Jackson's assertion that Myrdal never intended to consider African American culture within the study. Brown was one of the first scholars hired by Myrdal in the spring of 1939, rather than an afterthought.⁷⁶ Myrdal set a tight deadline for his team; between September 1939 and the spring of 1940, they were expected to research and deliver their memoranda. The aim was that Myrdal would use these, as well as previously published works, as raw material when composing the final manuscript. Myrdal set stretching targets for all of the advisers, including Brown. There was no hint at the beginning of the project that Myrdal would sideline the analysis of African American culture.

When Brown joined the project with a deadline set for submission of his memoranda for January 1940, Myrdal secured his release from teaching duties at Howard for the Autumn 1939 term.⁷⁷ The project funded one fulltime secretary/ research assistant and a part-time research assistant.⁷⁸ An early outline included an ambitious list of topics: 'the Negro in' American art, literature, on the stage, in the movies, in music, in dance, on the radio, in humour, in speech, and in sports, along with an analysis of black audiences for literature, movies and sports. Brown and Myrdal also had tentative discussions about including "Negro scientists, inventors, etc. and Negro journalism."⁷⁹ In July 1939, Brown promised Guy B. Johnson that he would include science and 'the Negro Press.'⁸⁰ The fact that Myrdal employed Brown, lobbied for a leave of absence for him from Howard University and set high expectations for his memorandum in terms of scope and ambition suggests that he was from the outset interested in and excited about his analysis of 'the Negro in American culture.'

⁷⁶ Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 130-32, 65-66; David W. Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations : The Use and Abuse of an American Dilemma, 1944-1969* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 37.

⁷⁷ Notes of a Conference with Sterling Brown by Gunnar Myrdal, 10 May 1939, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL; Gunnar Myrdal to Dean Charles M. Thompson, 9 Jun 1939, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁷⁸ Rowena Hadsell to Sterling A. Brown, 19 Sep 1939, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁷⁹ A brief outline of 'The Negro in American Culture,' undated. Report by Sterling A. Brown to Gunnar Myrdal, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁸⁰ Record of a Conference with Sterling Brown by Guy B. Johnson, 29 Jul 1939, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

Myrdal and Brown were sociable extroverts and developed a close friendship.⁸¹ Jackson may or may not have been correct in asserting that Myrdal had ‘no ear for music,’⁸² but his correspondence with Brown shows that he saw Brown as a mentor. Brown took him to many black venues. In New York, they went to the Savoy and to the Elks Rendezvous in Harlem, where Myrdal saw Louis Jordan perform. At Café Society, he saw the blues shouter Joe Turner, and boogie woogie musicians Pete Johnson, Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis. Brown also took Myrdal to dinner at Harrison’s in Florida Avenue with Lewis and they retired back to the Brown’s home in Brookland for a late night session. Myrdal was Brown’s guest at the rehearsal of the 1939 “Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall, where he saw Count Basie. Brown prepared a comprehensive index of black music and lent Myrdal dozens of corresponding recordings of a diverse range of black musicians playing work songs, spirituals, jazz, boogie woogie and blues. The catalogue included white spirituals and “ballads” so that Myrdal could hear the similarities and differences between black and white compositions.⁸³ The two also shared an irreverent sense of humour and Myrdal persistently chased Brown for his personal collection of African American anecdotes and jokes.⁸⁴

When in January 1940 Brown told Myrdal that he could not meet the original deadline, Myrdal agreed additional funding: a sum of \$900, mainly to cover an assistant and half-time salary for Brown for an additional three months to enable him to deliver a final draft for 1st June 1940.⁸⁵ His justification was that Brown was

actually not only doing a work of bigger scope than we planned ... but that you are also giving the study material for certain other sections particularly ... working up the anecdotes and stereotyped concepts in

⁸¹ Notes Following a Meeting with Myrdal and Sterling Brown by Charles Dollard, 9 Jun 1939, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL. This was remarked (in a paternalistic manner) by President Keppel’s assistant, Charles Dollard who noted that, “of all the negroes who are to work with Myrdal, Brown apparently is his favourite.”

⁸² Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience*, 131-32.

⁸³ Descriptive Catalogue of Forty-One Records by Sterling A. Brown, 20 Oct 1942, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL. Brown reminds Myrdal of the different characters and venues they visited together within the Catalogue.

⁸⁴ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 11 Aug 1941, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder Mo; Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 16 Mar 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder Mo; Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 22 May 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder Mo.

⁸⁵ Interview with Guion Griffis Johnson. Partly, this was likely because he realised that he had been entirely unrealistic when setting the original submission dates. By March 1940, only Guion Johnson had submitted a complete draft of her memorandum. Memorandum of Conversation with Sterling Brown by Gunnar Myrdal, 27 Jan 1940, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

such a way that the results will be important for the section on social attitudes and opinions.⁸⁶

As they got to know each other better, it appears that Brown influenced Myrdal to move away from having a section of the book that would document great achievements and towards a deeper analysis of ‘the Negro in American culture.’ Myrdal was taking Brown’s input seriously. In a letter written later, Myrdal notified Brown that he had written an outline for the final report, in which he had “a whole chapter which I must build upon your contribution.” He was also planning to rely very heavily on Brown’s memorandum for another chapter on “Attitude and Opinion.” Recognising his own shortcomings in this area and concerned because Brown’s submission was now very overdue, he emphasised that he was more interested in Brown’s analysis than the materials.⁸⁷

These letters provide concrete evidence that Myrdal was dependent on Brown to populate a whole chapter on black culture and that he would also incorporate Brown’s views within a second chapter on the attitudes and opinions of African Americans themselves. His emphasis on Brown’s analysis suggests that he was aware that he did not have the skills to handle material about art, literature, music or folklore, but trusted Brown to deliver a manuscript that he could use. His persistence in trying to get Brown to deliver over a period of years demonstrated a genuine commitment to incorporating a robust analysis of culture within his study and a conviction that Brown was the scholar to provide the insights into black culture that his study needed.

‘The Size of the Job’

A key question is what prevented Brown from providing the analysis needed for *An American Dilemma*. Between September 1939 and January 1940, he reviewed the scholarly literature on black culture. A detailed draft of his prospectus, probably written in autumn 1939, described his areas of investigation. The scope was unrealistic, particularly in areas beyond his

⁸⁶ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 27 Jan 1940, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁸⁷ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 11 Aug 1941.

professional experience. In his outline for ‘a study of the Negro in the moving pictures,’ Brown intended to analyse ‘All-Negro pictures’ produced by white companies, consider the opinions of Hollywood directors and producers on the ‘Hollywood Code’ concerning black participation, estimate the economic success of black pictures, tell the history of black production companies, critique productions, and consider black audience responses. He also aimed through interviews, correspondence and informal questionnaires to learn from actors and actresses their terms of employment and attitudes toward their roles. A project such as this could have perhaps been achieved given realistic resources in terms of time, money and personnel. Brown’s prospectus outlined more than a dozen such studies; all to take place within approximately four months with little assistance.⁸⁸

In January 1940, Brown returned to teaching half-time at Howard. When Myrdal returned to Sweden for a year, Brown seemed to flounder.⁸⁹ Ignoring his memoranda, he started the mammoth task of co-editing, with Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, an anthology of black literature, published in 1941 as *The Negro Caravan*. Although he had been officially laid off by the Writers’ Program,⁹⁰ he was following up various related projects. He taught summer school in Kentucky and returned to work full-time at Howard in the autumn. He did manage to submit sections of his manuscript to the Project office, specifically on the moving pictures and drama.⁹¹

On Myrdal’s return to America in March 1941, he was dissatisfied with Brown’s submissions which he felt “lack[ed] conclusions.” Although Brown promised to draw up a concise summary,⁹² the year wore on and nothing materialised.⁹³ Brown’s relationship with Myrdal and the project team became strained. He wrote to Myrdal in September to apologise for his tardiness, explaining that he had been obligated to his fellow editors on *The*

⁸⁸ Prospectus – the Negro in American Culture by Sterling A. Brown, Undated., Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁸⁹ Germany’s invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940 was the catalyst for a major decision – the Myrdals felt a moral responsibility to be in Europe.

⁹⁰ Formerly the Federal Writers’ Project, see chapter three.

⁹¹ Rowena Hadsell to Sterling A. Brown, 28 Aug 1940, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 10, Folder H;

Rowena Hadsell to Sterling A. Brown, 4 Oct 1940, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 10, Folder H.

⁹² Sterling A. Brown to Gunnar Myrdal, 13 Sep 1941, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁹³ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 11 Aug 1941.

Negro Caravan to get the book out because it was “first projected a year before the Carnegie study.” He promised that his submission was “well in hand” and would take fifteen days of solid work to complete.⁹⁴

Myrdal was unconvinced and prepared a memorandum for Samuel Stouffer to form the content of a formal warning letter to Brown:

You should ... say to Sterling ... that Charles or his Committee or the Carnegie Corporation felt very bad because he had not at all fulfilled his obligations but instead had taken other jobs interfering with his finishing his part of the study.⁹⁵

Stouffer wrote a stern letter to Brown in mid October 1941 along these lines. In early November, Brown, normally a poor correspondent, responded to Stouffer with a six-page typed letter. In it he told Stouffer: “ my conscience and my belief in myself as scholar and writer have taken a bad beating in this whole affair.” Citing his inexperience in projects of this nature and his lack of professional training in some of the fields of investigation (music, art), Brown explained that he “just had no conception of the size of the job when I tackled it.” Brown explained that he was only getting in his stride when the first deadline (January 1940) expired. Between January and June 1940, he could not juggle part-time work on the study with his teaching duties at Howard and his role as consultant on the Federal Writers’ Project. During that spring, he also felt compelled to proceed with editorial duties on *The Negro Caravan*. In the autumn of 1940, financial necessity due to his wife’s illness had forced him to take on a commission for a book about the black South.

The tone of the letter varied from paragraph to paragraph. Brown was deeply apologetic, noting the honour of being chosen to contribute, and that he was aware of the “the jeopardy of not completing work for which I gave my word, work for which I have been paid.” In other parts of the letter he was defensive:

I completed well over a thousand pages of manuscript. With much of this, because of haste, I was certainly dissatisfied. In some of the sections, e.g. music and athletics, I left gaps, either because of time or

⁹⁴ Sterling A. Brown to Gunnar Myrdal, 13 Sep 1941.

⁹⁵ Memorandum on the Subject of 'Letter to Sterling Brown,' Gunnar Myrdal to Samuel A. Stouffer, 13 Sep 1941.

lack of material at the time. I still thought the material would be useful. I received little critical assistance....

In parts, the tone was plaintive: “the speed of the job and the threat of the deadline – really something of a nightmare – prevented my best and soundest work;” “I did, under the circumstances, a job that I do not believe to be a complete failure.” Overall, there is an air of desperation:

I have just had no time to do more.... I do not get any two consecutive days for writing. I have university commitments, large classes, heavy paper work.⁹⁶

Although Stouffer’s response was sympathetic, he noted, “the objective fact is, of course, that your manuscript isn’t finished.” Behind the scenes, officials at the Carnegie Corporation were less understanding. Charles Dollard, assistant to President Keppel, noted that it might be “unkind” to label Brown’s letter the “product of an uneasy conscience” but that he found Brown’s reasons for failing to deliver despite having been well paid “unconvincing.”

More than that, Dollard wondered whether “the failure of all our Negro collaborators to produce anything which could be printed” could be “something in the nature of passive resistance.”⁹⁷ This was a remarkable statement given that Ralph Bunche had contributed about three thousand pages to the study within his memoranda.⁹⁸ Myrdal had also used Charles S. Johnson’s writings extensively, so much so that Johnson wrote to his wife Marie to say that “it looks as if my materials are the core of the general study.”⁹⁹ Davis and St. Clair Drake also submitted their texts on black churches in the Lower South and Chicago respectively.

By December 1941, Myrdal was in despair at Brown’s lack of output. They had agreed on a more limited discussion of ‘Negro Culture,’ a “100 page condensed but stringent analysis,” but Brown was not delivering. He told Brown frankly:

⁹⁶ Sterling A. Brown to Samuel A. Stouffer, 5 Nov 1941, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁹⁷ Charles Dollard to Samuel A. Stouffer, 17 Nov 1941, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

⁹⁸ Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche : An American Life*, 50.

⁹⁹ Charles S. Johnson to Marie Johnson, 13 January 1941. Cited in Gilpin and Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson : Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, 76.

I have never doubted your ability to write an extraordinary book on the subject [of black art and literature], and you will probably sometime do it. But your work has some connection with the study I am directing, and all possible deadlines are over-run since months and years. Help me get this straightened out.¹⁰⁰

Brown wrote Myrdal a long handwritten letter in January 1942, largely repeating the contents of his earlier letter to Stouffer. He received a further \$150 for typing of his manuscript in March 1942. By May 1942, Myrdal had downgraded his expectations:

there will still be a month before I finish the chapter where the 'accomplishments' should fit. So if you have any chance of sending me your memorandum, I can still take care of it.¹⁰¹

A project file note recorded starkly that Charles Dollard, "amused and irritated," had written to Myrdal on hearing that Sterling Brown had accepted a Rosenwald fellowship to do a new book, "his conscience is certainly an easily quieted one."¹⁰²

As Brown admitted in his letters, he did prioritise other projects. In 1940 and 1941, he concentrated on his editorial work on *The Negro Caravan* (1941). In 1942, he began an intensive period of travelling in the South to collect material for another book, *A Negro Looks at the South* (discussed in chapter five). Overall, however, the evidence suggests that as the lone poet and critic on the project, Brown lacked the experience and the resources to manage the project within the time available. He was overwhelmed by the unwieldy nature of his area of responsibility and neither the Project Team nor Myrdal offered assistance in framing a more realistic scope.

Furthermore, he seemed unable to reconcile his own approach to cultural strengths and the sorts of methodologies that he had developed with Botkin in the early 1930s with the more empirical focus of the majority of the scholars on the study. They concentrated in the main on amassing evidence about systematic discrimination. He was interested in bringing to life the

¹⁰⁰ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 4 Dec 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder Mo.

¹⁰¹ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 5 May 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder MO.

¹⁰² Unsigned File Note, 27 May 1942, Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL.

complexities and depth of black life often through individuals' own words and music. Literary historian John Edgar Tidwell argues that Brown, caught between his own approach that was "subjective, intimate and humanistic" and Myrdal's "supposed objectivity," attempted to be more scientific and to capture "attitudes and attitudinal change" through quantitative and qualitative methods.¹⁰³ As evidenced above, Brown certainly tried to adopt a more 'scientific' methodology. He knew what approaches he could take – historical accounts, interviews, surveys, and analysis of data – but there is no sense that he understood the extent of the resources that would be required to deliver. Hence, he imposed upon himself the added impediment of operating in a framework that was not the norm for him and without sufficient resources to succeed. However, as I explore below, he put considerable effort into his submission and did try to reach a compromise between his approach and that of Myrdal, with mixed success.

Brown's Submission to the Study

When Myrdal returned to Sweden in September 1942, Brown's chance to deliver a thorough analysis of African American Culture to be incorporated in *An American Dilemma* was over. He never produced the "stringent analysis" that he had promised Myrdal.¹⁰⁴ Three sections (sports, the stage and music) of his memoranda were submitted. However, Jackson's criticism of Brown for failing to "explore the nuances of Afro-American folk culture" and instead providing "a dull, superficial survey of blacks' contributions to mainstream American culture" is unjust.¹⁰⁵ My analysis below of Brown's "Section G - Music," demonstrates that although he did not achieve his own aim of providing a full and nuanced analysis of African American culture, he did produce much more than "a dull and superficial survey."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Tidwell, "In Defense of African American Culture: Sterling A. Brown, Gunnar Myrdal and *An American Dilemma*," 209-33.

¹⁰⁴ Gunnar Myrdal to Sterling A. Brown, 4 Dec 1941, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder Mo.

¹⁰⁵ Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, 131-32.

¹⁰⁶ I have selected Brown's Section G – Music (rather than his submissions on athletics or the theatre) as it is here that he has been most influential in subsequent decades.

Brown on the Spirituals

The originality and quality of the spirituals had been debated since at least the Civil War when white northerners first began to collect the songs and music. When the Fisk University singers embarked on their first tour in 1871, the group had to “distinguish its mission of university development and religious and aesthetic edification from demeaning minstrel entertainment.”¹⁰⁷ By the 1930s, black and white cultural critics had largely accepted the spirituals as a unique form of artistic expression and they were reviewed in national publications such as the *New York Times*.¹⁰⁸ However, in 1933 when music critic Olin Downes reviewed the Fisk University Choir at Carnegie Hall, he bemoaned the fact that their presentation lacked “the wildness, the melancholy, the intense religious feeling communicated when Negroes sing in the sacred spirit and the uncorrupted manner of their race.”¹⁰⁹ It seemed that an appreciation of the spirituals was still often linked to a romanticised stereotype of black personality, as innately religious and deeply emotional.

Brown’s submission on the spirituals focused almost entirely on the controversy in relation to their origins, which began in earnest in 1893 when a Viennese musicologist Richard Wallaschek derided them as mere imitations of European songs. Brown considered the critique of Wallaschek by American scholar Henry Krehbiel, who had analysed 527 black spirituals to demonstrate that these were the only indigenous American folksongs and that their “essential intervallic, rhythmical and structural elements came from Africa.” He also presented the arguments of black scholars John W. Work, James Weldon Johnson, Natalie Curtis and George Julius Ballanta, who argued along the same lines as Krehbiel.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Anderson, *Deep River*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ Hollister Norle, “Negro Songs Lay a Spell on America,” *New York Times*, 28 Feb 1926; R. W. Gordon, “Folk-Songs of America: The Spirituals; Search for American Melodies Reveals an Untapped Store of Negro Religious Music” *ibid.*, 20 Feb 1927; Percy Hutchinson, “Those Haunting Refrains of the Spirituals in ‘More Mellows’; R. Emmet Kennedy Gathers Another Harvest of Negro Melodies in His Second Anthology of Our Most Indigenous Music,” *ibid.*, 31 May 1931.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, *Deep River*, 13.

¹¹⁰ Sterling A. Brown, “The Negro in American Culture - Section G Music 1940,” (Carnegie-Myrdal Study, NYPL), 1-72.

Brown rounded off the chapter with a section on the aftermath of the controversy, bemoaning the fact that black musical scholars had not provided a strong response, and instead issued “heated denials and impugning of motives.” He included an *Opportunity* editorial of 1932 noting that it was not until the spirituals received international acclaim from musical authorities that scholars tried to prove that they were white in origin. Black historian Carter G. Woodson argued that whites made efforts to prove that blacks could not create anything worthwhile and must therefore be branded inferior. Brown dismissed such comments as “scholarship beclouded by race” and was disappointed that nobody had considered whether there was “reciprocal giving and taking.”¹¹¹

We can infer from Brown’s comment that he believed that there likely was cultural reciprocity in the development of the spirituals and that they were a hybrid of sorts. Yet we have little analysis from the normally astute Brown on the important questions that were hinted at within his largely descriptive account of the controversy on the spirituals. Indeed his critique of the arguments was hidden amongst long floating quotations from the various sources. In the light of Myrdal’s study of African American life, why was the controversy important and what did it highlight? On the question of whether the spirituals were a black creation, the vast majority of the scholars cited by Brown argued, like Carl Engel, that “to deny the Negro’s independent and prominent share in the development of American music would be preposterous, to insist upon more would be equally senseless.”¹¹²

Brown established that the scholarly consensus confirmed that the words and ideas of the spirituals were linked to camp meetings, attended by blacks and whites, of the great religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening (late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries). Research also demonstrated that the music had retained features of African folksong. Brown failed to explicate why the issue of African survivals was so deeply contentious within academic circles, both black and white. Similarly, the stereotypes of black emotionalism

¹¹¹ Ibid., 60-72.

¹¹² Ibid., 29.

and an alleged special religiosity were touched upon but Brown (although deeply opposed to the idea of racial essentialism) failed to explain and elaborate on why this was important. He did not point out its political and social significance although his other writings make it painfully clear that the American population at large still held to dated stereotypes about 'Negro' temperament and questioned the ability of black Americans to function as rational members of society. The evidence suggests that the pressure of working alongside the nation's top social scientists, along with Brown's desire to 'win his spurs in scholarship,' preoccupied him, blunted his analytical skills and prevented him from providing a clear account of what the spirituals meant for black American culture and the national culture.

In comparison, Brown's introduction to the "Folk Literature" section of *The Negro Caravan* provided a more authoritative analysis. He discussed debates in the literature about the spirituals such as whether they were the product of individual or group authorship, concluding that "It is unlikely that any group of worshippers and singers, as a group, composed spirituals." He noted that "gifted individuals" may have played a part but:

from the folk storehouse came the ideas, the vocabulary, the idioms, the images. The folk approved the song or rejected it, as it squared with folk knowledge, memory and vision.¹¹³

This idea of what the folk knew and remembered and how that was refined over time was integral to Brown's understanding of black folk culture. In his Roland Hayes review written nearly two decades earlier, Brown had remarked that the blacks in the audience were "stirred by something deep within as old as human wrong, as tragical as loss of worlds."¹¹⁴ This was Brown's first observation of the power of racial memory, the need to remember the past and the knowledge that black music had a valuable and living function for black Americans. Historian Sterling Stuckey described Brown's ability to convey the relationship between past and present in black culture and to express "how music and myth function in the lives of ordinary people."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Sterling A. Brown, "Folk Literature," in *The Negro Caravan : Writings by American Negroes*, ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970), 414.

¹¹⁴ Brown, "Roland Hayes," 173-74.

¹¹⁵ Stuckey, *Going through the Storm*, 150.

Brown also used this technique in his poetry where as critic Jean Wagner described: “past and present hail and respond to one another, and through this interplay each becomes endowed with fresh meaning and a new dimension.”¹¹⁶ The strength of racial memory and its use as a sustaining force would have been a powerful antidote to the notion of cultural pathology in *An American Dilemma*, but Brown did not deploy it.

In *The Negro Caravan*, Brown also tackled the problem of origins, recalling that in the late nineteenth century, the notion that black composers were capable of such artistic creation was considered “presumptuous” and black songs were criticised as “ignorantly borrowed” from the European tradition by Wallaschek. Brown set out the opposing positions including that of Krehniel, John W. Work, James Weldon Johnson and others whom he felt sometimes overstated their arguments in favour of the originality of the songs and their Africanisms. Noting that Guy B. Johnson, Newman White and George Pullen Jackson had found similarities between white and black spirituals, Brown concluded that “extremists have set up the controversy as between Africanism, or complete originality, and white camp-meeting derivation, or complete unoriginality,” a polarisation that led to oversimplification. Brown also criticised the limitations of the evidence: few of those involved had satisfactory knowledge of all three types of music (African music, southern white music and slave songs) on which to base their conclusions. Furthermore, comparisons were based on the musical notations of collectors, which could not capture black Americans performance styles. Brown set out his own view, that each musical tradition had influenced the other but concluded that

all of this does not establish the Negro spiritual, and most certainly not hot jazz, the blues, and boogie-woogie, as imitations of white music, or as unoriginal, or as devoid of traces of the African idiom.

Rather, he was sure that black folk songs were “a new kind of music, certainly not mere imitation, but more creative and original than any other American music.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, 477.

¹¹⁷ Brown, “Folk Literature,” 415-17.

Brown went on to refute Newman White's claim that the spirituals were not expressions of the oppression of slavery because there were few songs that spoke openly of "a love for freedom and a determination to be free." Using evidence from fugitive slave autobiographies and his own analysis of such lyrics as "Bye and bye, I'm gonna lay down dis heavy load" and "O I been rebuked, and I been scorned," Brown showed that the slave "took a clear-eyed look at this world, and he revealed in tragic poetry what he saw." He agreed with folklorist Zora Neale Hurston that the spirituals could not be wholly captured by the term 'sorrow songs' because they held "a robustness, a vitality, a fused strength."¹¹⁸

The Blues and Ragtime

It is peculiar that Brown did not submit a section on the blues to the Myrdal study given that he considered them "second in importance only to the spirituals."¹¹⁹ In a 1931 article, Brown challenged those who dismissed the blues as repetitious love songs dwelling on "a woman's longing for her rambling man." As discussed in chapter two, he pointed out a broad range of themes: farming, floods, illnesses, work songs, cottonfields, animal fables, superstitions, proverbs, chain gangs, prisons, suicides and murders, money, the ravages of the weather including tornadoes and floods, the boll weevil destroying crops, the First World War, a longing to travel, migrants wishing to return south, southerners praying for a chance to move north and the trains that would take them there. Alluding to the universal themes of the blues as an expressive form, he demonstrated that love was presented in a complex way in the blues, taking many forms and depicting faithlessness as well as devotion, and tenderness, cynicism and humour as well as romanticism.¹²⁰

Brown praised the poetic imagery built into blues compositions: their comic exaggeration, the suffering expressed and resisted. He provided many

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 418-20.

¹¹⁹ *The Negro Caravan*, 426.

¹²⁰ "The Blues as Folk Poetry."

examples of their poetic value, and demonstrated that their apparently casual realism, “in substituting the thing seen for the bookish dressing up and sentimentalizing,” was immensely powerful. For example, Brown contrasted “a rather wet ballad”:

All the world seemed so happy and gay.
The waters rose quickly above us
And it swept my beloved ones away-ay-ay-ay.

with the evocative description provided in “Backwater Blues”:

It thundered an’ lightened an’ de wind begin to blow.
Thousan’s of people ain’t got no place to go.¹²¹

In stark contrast to the stereotyped content of “coon” songs (discussed below), the blues demonstrated a wide range of emotional responses to adversity including stoicism, self-pity, humor and melancholy.¹²²

Although Brown has been frequently cited as a powerful influence upon those later writing about the blues, he published very little about African American music. He included a short section on the blues in *The Negro Caravan* with examples of the blues to show “something of the poetic imagery of the blues, which is often of a high order.”¹²³ He updated his 1930 *Folk-Say* article in the 1950s for a series on African American folk music in the University of Atlanta journal *Phylon*, but the articles added little to his previous statements.¹²⁴ He was ignored by many writers on folklore and music as the century unfolded.¹²⁵ Brown’s impact on studies of black music came about as much through his informal sharing of information, expertise and knowledge as through the articles he published. He was recognised by record collectors and music critics as an expert on the blues and jazz. For example, in the second half of the

¹²¹ Ibid., 326-38.

¹²² Ibid., 325-26.

¹²³ “Folk Literature,” 426-30.

¹²⁴ “Negro Folk Expression,” *Phylon* 11 (1950): 318-27; “The Blues,” *Phylon* 13 (1952): 286-92; “Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs,” *Phylon* 14 (1953): 45-61.

¹²⁵ Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979. “There’s a cat named Larry Neal who’s writing and he lists the people interested in the folk stuff and doesn’t even list me”; Richard M. Dorson, *Handbook of American Folklore* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), 435-36. Folklorist Archie Green sets out a line of African American music criticism from Abbe Niles and Carl Van Vechten in the 1920s to what he refers to as the first academic criticism by Herbert Halpert (1936), Claude M. Simpson (1947), and Charles Seeger (1948) and ignores Brown.

1930s, he became friendly with white journalist Charles Edward Smith, who shared his views on race and class. Brown advised Frederic Ramsey and Smith on the influential *Jazzmen*, which focused on the stories of the musicians themselves rather than a chronological academic history of the development of jazz.¹²⁶ In 1941, Smith was working on a chapter on the blues for a new book,¹²⁷ and wrote to Brown to ask him for help:

I am going to list Handy's book ... but while I liked that book immensely it doesn't begin to talk on the subjects discussed in your treatise, nor does any other book I know of.¹²⁸

Brown also gave many lectures on music. For example, he famously hosted the second of music promoter John Hammond's "Spirituals to Swing" concerts in December 1939 for a mixed black and white audience in New York's Carnegie Hall.¹²⁹ In December 1940, he spoke on "Blues, Ballads and Social Songs," subsequently published as part of Seventy-Five Years of Freedom Library of Congress celebration.¹³⁰ John Shepherd has pointed out that his writings, alongside those of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, made it clear that "black folk culture and popular music represent genuine locations for the examination of black political and social sensibilities."¹³¹

Brown wrote his first extensive analysis of ragtime for the Carnegie Myrdal study. He demonstrated that black Americans were the 'producers' of ragtime, whites the 'purveyors.' The origins of the trend were black, and ragtime emanated from the brothels of the South, such as "Madame 'Babe' Connor's sporting house for colored girls," in the 1890s. White composers frequented coloured clubrooms to pick up songs, "jotting down .. melodies and

¹²⁶ Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith, *Jazzmen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939).

¹²⁷ Charles Edward Smith, Frederic Ramsey, et al., *The Jazz Record Book* (New York: Smith & Durrell, 1942).

¹²⁸ Charles Edward Smith to Sterling A. Brown, 16 Aug 1941, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 8, Folder S.

¹²⁹ Josh White Golden Gate Quartet, Sterling A. Brown, Alain Locke, and Alan Lomax, *Freedom a Concert in Celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States* (New York, NY: Bridge, 2002).

¹³⁰ Sterling A. Brown, "Blues, Ballads and Social Songs," *Seventy-Five Years of Freedom*, 18 Dec 1940; Biographical File on Sterling A. Brown, Vassar College Biographical Files, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

¹³¹ John Shepherd, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World 1, 1* (London: Continuum, 2003), 58. Shepherd notes that Hurston, Brown and Hughes's early endeavours paved the way for studies such as Charles Keil's *Urban Blues* (1966) and Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977). See also his influence on Amiri Baraka, discussed in the Conclusion.

expressions ‘on the cuff.’” Brown noted that white ‘stealing’ or ‘appropriating’ of African American songs was “flagrant in the early days (and the heyday) of ragtime.” White performers May Irwin and Ben Harney, known as the mother and father of ragtime, were “really foster parents, decking out the child that Negroes –the true parents – had left on the doorstep.” The whites had access to publishers and advertising that was closed to black composers and performers and hence were able to market ragtime in a way that black Americans could not.¹³²

Many white composers had undertaken their apprenticeships in minstrelsy and the audiences were familiar with minstrel songs. Brown emphasised that:

... when songwriters wanted comedy, or frankness in handling the ‘ungenteel’ facts of life, they generally made use of what passed for Negro life and dialect and rhythm.

Coon songs, made popular most famously by Bert Williams and George Walker, were often obscene and full of stereotypes of so-called ‘Negro predilections:’ parties, razors, chicken, pork and watermelon, and gambling. The tone was one of ridicule and ‘race’ aspirations were burlesqued. Whereas minstrelsy had “showed sentimental heroines in a pastoral setting,” coon songs were unromantic portrayals of ‘the Negro’ in northern cities. Brown noted the appeal of a genre to a white audience when it could provide

things forbidden ... the franker side of sex, the ‘gold-digging,’ fighting for one’s man or one’s woman, the various degrees of sexual proficiency.

All of these could be mentioned without damaging one’s reputation “if the actors involved were Negroes.” Brown regretted the stereotypes of laziness, gluttony, violence, and of blacks raising their status by marrying a “high yaller” or imitating the mannerisms of rich whites.¹³³ The stereotypes that Brown had exposed and analysed in fiction from the early 1930s¹³⁴ functioned in much the same way in the development of ragtime as they had in literature. They served to maintain the black American’s low status in society and

¹³² Brown, “The Negro in American Culture - Section G Music 1940,” 73-82.

¹³³ Ibid., 80-94.

¹³⁴ “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” 197-98. See chapter one for a fuller discussion of Brown’s analysis of stereotypes in literature.

provided vicarious thrills to the wider public, permitting a voyeuristic participation in aspects of life that could not be articulated in 'polite' society.

In a section devoted to Bob Cole and the Johnson brothers, Brown explained that in cleaning up the caricatures of the coon songs, the composers had perhaps stripped the compositions of their "Negro essence." This was an unusual statement for Brown who, as described in chapter one, was opposed to any notion of racial essentialism. However, Brown failed to make his meaning explicit to his readers. An offhand comparison to May Irwin implies that the "Negro essence" to which Brown referred was synonymous in his mind with black dialect and themes, rather than to any innate 'Negro characteristics.' He compared Cole and Johnson brothers' compositions to the black tune May Irwin heard on a train and made into a hit, "The New Bully Song":

Have yo' heard about dat bully, dat's just come to town
He's around among de niggers a-layin' their bodies down.

He inferred that May Irwin had retained the flavour of black dialect and themes whilst, in their efforts to dismantle the stereotypes in ragtime, Cole and the Johnsons had abandoned such material altogether and gravitated towards white style and content in their songs.

Brown also examined ragtime from the critics' perspective, outlining the views of John Tasker Howard (author of general music history *Our American Music*, 1931), Maude Cuney Hare (African American musician and writer), Don Knowlton (freelance writer), and critics Winthrop Sargeant, Isaac Goldberg, and Gilbert Seldes. They agreed that syncopation was key and that syncopation in ragtime was substantially different from that in Western music, in that it appeared continuously, irregularly and in the melody and the harmony. Critics also noted that because ragtime came from an aural rather than written tradition, and because the syncopation of the melody and the harmony was different, it was difficult for those trained in the European tradition to play.

Critics were in agreement that ragtime “derived from the Negro” (Seldes), and that earlier ragtime was “definitely and refreshingly black” (Goldberg). Brown ended the chapter with what he dubbed a “racialist interpretation” by Goldberg:

Ragtime is ... the raucous belly laughter of the black after his awed service to the white man's and the Hebrew children's Jehovah It brings up, from the dives of the South, from the levees and the swamps of darkest America, a robust humor that acts like a transfusion of blood... It would lead – it has, indeed, led to psychic miscegenation, to a sort of intellectual and emotional intermarriage.

In Goldberg's interpretation, ragtime is reactive: the unfettered, free, and unsocialised response of black Americans to their treatment by white Americans. His language calls to mind vicarious thrills: “the swamps of darkest America,” “a transfusion of blood.” This is the sort of terminology that Brown skilfully exposed in his literary criticism as continuing to associate African Americans with primitivism and a lack of intellectual reasoning,¹³⁵ and yet here he provided no personal commentary or analysis. The reader is left wondering what Brown made of Goldberg's romantic and ‘racialist’ notion of ragtime as bringing the intellects and the emotions of black and white audiences together.¹³⁶

Although Brown's writing on the blues would influence leading cultural historians later in the century, he failed to submit any analysis of the blues to Myrdal. He did produce an original and logical narrative on the development of ragtime. He was even-handed in his criticism of black and white composers but he did ensure that the achievements of black producers such as Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, Will Marion Cook, and James Reese Europe were acknowledged. He noted the stereotypes of the coon songs produced by Ernest Hogan, Bert Williams and George Walker and the pressures of commercialisation. He also paid some attention to rags as musical compositions - melody, harmony and syncopation. Throughout the text, he alluded to the social and political significance of aspects of ragtime's development: the uneven power relations between whites and blacks from the

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ "The Negro in American Culture - Section G Music 1940," 117-23.

outset, the difficulty black composers and musicians had in challenging minstrel stereotypes whilst retaining the richness in dialect, imagery, themes and innovation of the music. Ultimately, however, this section of the manuscript lacked the overarching analysis, critique and context that would enable it to be incorporated effectively into Myrdal's text.

Brown on Jazz

Brown explored the origins of jazz in New Orleans, noting that both blacks and whites developed the music in the city. Black bands and small orchestras had existed in slavery times and after Emancipation, black musicians played at dances and on the river steamers. It was an 'ear' music, played by musicians without formal training, with much improvisation and a free style. This section is filled with lively anecdotes about Buddy Bolden, Bunk Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver, threaded together in a skilful narrative that moves back and forth between white and black New Orleans and follows the journeys of the jazz men to Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. The style reflects the reciprocity that Brown described in relation to the birth and infancy of jazz in New Orleans.¹³⁷

In the early 1920s, Paul Whiteman created an immensely popular cleaned-up 'respectable' symphonic style, which started a trend for 'sweet jazz.'¹³⁸ Brown critiqued what he deliberately punned the 'Whiteman' era, and chronicled the movement of "authentic jazz, the 'good coarse stuff,'" which shifted with black southerners to industrial cities such as Kansas City, Detroit and Chicago. White bands from the South also travelled north and west, to "lucrative and often 'tuxedoed' engagements," whereas black musicians were generally confined to small dancehalls and barrelhouses. Critics ignored black musicians in their reviews but "young white musicians knew where to go and find them, and knew what their worth really was." He provided examples of white musicians such as Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman and Frank

¹³⁷ Ibid., 128-38.

¹³⁸ Scott Yanow, *Jazz on Record : The First Sixty Years* (San Francisco, Calif.: Backbeat Books, 2003), 39-40.

Teschemaker who sought out particular black musicians such as King Oliver, Johnny Dodds and Louis Armstrong and learned from their playing styles. Brown traced the development of 'swing' or the 'hot' style of jazz, played by black musicians such as Willie 'The Lion' Smith, 'Fats' Waller, Meade 'Lux' Lewis and Fletcher Henderson. He described the increasing success of swing as musicians such as Louis Armstrong travelled to Europe and European critics such as Hugues Panassie took the music seriously. Brown noted the influence of producer John Hammond who not only promoted swing but also supported African American musicians "realizing the economic disadvantages confronting him." Brown provided sections on the central features that defined swing such as improvisations, free arrangements, and the relationship between the melody and rhythm, and on the language or jargon that developed alongside swing.¹³⁹

Brown considered jazz to have had a more positive and powerful impact on the colour line than other genres of music. He stated that:

More than in war, science, scholarship, athletics or art, there has been in music a meeting between Negroes and whites on a plain of respect and collaboration.

He saw jazz as bringing about "the phenomenon of Negro and white reciprocity" in three important ways: firstly, through white musicians playing at black venues, secondly, when black and white musicians jammed together at black venues and recorded together anonymously, and thirdly, (to a much lesser extent) when musicians played in racially mixed bands. He also praised the jazz periodicals such as *Swing*, *Metronome* and *Downbeat* as "distinctive in American journalism because of the fairness and abundance of the material they publish about Negroes." Unlike the mainstream press, they avoided racial stereotyping, including articles and photographs about blacks and whites on the same pages of their magazines. Brown highlighted that there was still plenty of prejudice against African American musicians. For example, on tour with Artie Shaw's band, Billie Holliday was only allowed to sing on two numbers per night and travelled in the freight elevators of

¹³⁹ Brown, "The Negro in American Culture - Section G Music 1940," 152-97.

segregated hotels. Racial prejudice existed on both sides and Brown commented that many black musicians were opposed to mixed bands. This was due mainly to economic competition: they were subject to discrimination and reduced opportunities in comparison to white musicians, and they perceived white musicians visiting black nightspots as ‘raids.’¹⁴⁰

Brown completed his chapter on jazz with a section called “Racial Elements in Jazz” with an analysis of origins, concluding that:

The farthest that we can go is ‘hot’ music stems from Negro origins; that Negroes have taught the ‘hot’ style to many white musicians, just as whites taught a more ‘formal’ style to Negroes.

The music had developed so much that precise racial distinctions could not be made. At the time of writing, Brown considered that all-black bands were more likely to play the ‘hot’ style but there were many exceptions:

the ‘hot’ style has so permeated white America, and so many Negro bandsmen have made a serious study of music at conservatories and from other bands, white and Negroes – that racial generalizations are as insecure here as in other fields.¹⁴¹

Brown never finished his memorandum on music. It comprised of only three of the eight intended sections - spirituals, ragtime and jazz. The introduction, chapters on minstrelsy, the blues, concert music and the conclusion were missing. Their omission left the reader without a sense of Brown’s intentions or his own thesis on the origins and development of black music, the interplay between the races as the music developed and became commercially successful, and the tensions that arose along the way. Brown’s chapter on the spirituals was largely a scholarly summation of intellectual and popular arguments about origins. His accounts of the development of ragtime and jazz were more original as there had been few previous attempts to fully record their development and certainly no comprehensive account by a leading black scholar. Their inclusion in *An American Dilemma* could have brought a deeper understanding of the development of the music and the degree to

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 199-219.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 235-36.

which black and white Americans had developed indigenous musical styles together to a very wide readership.

Stylistically, Brown also attempted to innovate. Within his chapters on ragtime and particularly jazz, he attempted a blend of scholarly authority (careful referencing and a range of credible sources) with anecdotes and testimony from primary sources. He used Smith and Ramsay's *Jazzmen* liberally (itself a medley of interviews, sketches and anecdotes) but he also made good use of biographies and autobiographies of musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and articles and interviews in magazines and journals such as *Downbeat*, *Swing Magazine* and *Esquire*.

Although Brown's submission was incomplete and weak in comparison to his other work, he did provide an overview, albeit uneven, of key themes within African American music. Clearly rushed and incoherent in parts, Brown nevertheless attempted to provide Myrdal with a logical narrative that explained key aspects of the music, its origins and its subsequent development. Brown used a wider range of sources than many preceding critics. He brought a new perspective to the material that attempted to even-handedly look at the involvement of black and white Americans in its evolution and to consider reciprocity. He ultimately failed to build an analysis that could help Myrdal make sense of how the development of African American culture affected the overall circumstances of African Americans. To do so, he would have had to make more explicit links between black culture and the social, political and economic situation of African Americans.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Sterling Brown was rendered mute in the context of the Carnegie Myrdal study, a study that was to be influential for decades to follow. However, I have demonstrated above that the reasons for this were more complex than previous historians have acknowledged.

The first problem for Sterling Brown was that Myrdal was not the dispassionate impartial observer that the Carnegie Corporation planned to engage. Myrdal was a committed social engineer who was keen to change what he saw as a dysfunctional and unfair social system. To evidence the damage to blacks, he and his team provided a battery of data that showed the devastating impact of discrimination on black lives through legal, social and economic means. His objective, to provide irrefutable proof of the impact of racial discrimination, was shared by a number of scholars involved in the project and particularly by the black social scientists. Brown's more nuanced view, which recognised oppression but identified also the cultural resistance that provided some protection to African Americans did not fit easily with Myrdal's agenda. He wanted to deliver a stark message. White Americans could not espouse democratic values whilst treating black Americans so unfairly.

Neither did the team support Brown's position on culture. This was partly because they related to Myrdal as individuals and had very little time together to thrash out their aims or conflicting perspectives. Furthermore, most of these scholars valued detachment, objectivity, and the 'scientific' approach. Brown's approach was subjective and humanistic yet he felt obliged to attempt to measure up and be 'scientific,' but he was ill equipped either financially or in terms of his own skills.

Few of the team were interested in culture and there was also conflict about the existence of African survivals that tended to push scholars into polarised positions in relation to the debate. Although African American social scientists did not want assimilation to the extent that black people lost their own identity as a people, they were strongly focused on demonstrating the effects of racial discrimination to the detriment of considering the positive aspects of black cultural practices and institutions. Politically, they were caught in their own dilemma: too great an emphasis on the adaptivity and resilience of African American culture could serve as evidence that could be used by white supremacists to argue that segregation was positive for both races. This meant that Myrdal and his contributors lost any sense of the

strengths of African Americans in terms of creating and developing their own positive cultural forms and institutions. To build his case, Myrdal emphasised the 'hard data' provided by contributors such as Bunche and Sterner and gave little thought to African American culture, an area much less familiar to him than economics or political science. He left culture in Sterling Brown's hands.

To incorporate a comprehensive analysis of African American culture within *An American Dilemma* would have required significantly more of Myrdal and the Carnegie Corporation than they were prepared to offer. Myrdal's failing was not as Jackson has suggested that he had no interest in incorporating an analysis of African American culture within *An American Dilemma*. As I have demonstrated above, he had every intention of doing so. Had Brown succeeded in delivering a coherent argument on the cultural resilience and value of African American culture, it is possible that Myrdal could have integrated it into his arguments, thereby demonstrating that despite a barrage of discrimination, black Americans had incubated a deep store of folk tales, talk, song and literature to sustain them, inculcate racial pride and influence the development of the mainstream American culture.

However, Myrdal and the Carnegie Corporation commissioned a study from Brown that was unrealistic in scope and insufficiently resourced. The difficulty was exacerbated because Brown had no editorial support and was isolated as the sole cultural scholar on the project. Ultimately, Myrdal and the study's administrators labelled Brown a failure although they had set him up to fail. Without a strong submission from Brown, Myrdal could not demonstrate that African Americans had developed a strong cultural world of their own which helped them to resist the oppression and exploitation perpetuated upon them by white Americans. Not only had African Americans developed this cultural world but they had also strongly influenced America's national identity and the mainstream culture through their creative efforts. Brown did not succeed in infiltrating *An American Dilemma* and conveying 'the truth' of the African American cultural world. In my next chapter, I examine Brown's attempts to use a different methodology to 'capture the truth of Negro experience' in the South during World War Two.

Chapter 5. Miles Apart: The Southern Journeys of Jonathan W. Daniels and Sterling A. Brown

Introduction

I still smell the wood smoke, the pig fat, and the perspiration which together remain for me the by no means unpleasant smell of Negro. (Jonathan W. Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*.)¹

The next time I come to Raleigh, I hope you will be in town, for I want you to tell me whether or not I smell of wood smoke, pig fat and perspiration. Yes, I am a Negro. (Letter from Wilhelmina Roberts to Jonathan Daniels dated 16th December 1938).²

Mr. Daniels is almost always fair-minded and sympathetic. He repeats again and again the idea that “the Negro was set free in a manner of speaking,” and he resents contemporary injustice and exploitation. (Review by Sterling A. Brown in *Opportunity* dated December 1938).³

In December 1938, Sterling Brown reviewed a book called *A Southerner Discovers the South*. Noting its “candid photography” and its “valuable social commentary,” Brown praised Jonathan Daniels’ willingness to expose subjects that were normally taboo such as:

Virginia gentlemen ‘breeding slaves for the Deep South,’ the Ku Klux Klan likened to the Brown Shirts of Germany and the Black Shirts of Italy.

He liked too the way Daniels included a range of views rather than describing the stereotypical ‘solid South,’ which had been sentimentalized and standardized in literature. Daniels approached people from all strata of society, “the untitled, the anonymous,” repeating and distilling the thoughts of “governors and editors, economists and poets, café loungers and tramps, hopeful socialists and embittered mine-operators.”⁴

¹ Jonathan W. Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1938), 2.

² Wilhelmina Roberts to Jonathan W. Daniels, 16 Dec 1938, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³ Sterling A. Brown, “South on the Move,” *Opportunity* 16 (1938): 366-69.

⁴ Ibid.

Daniels, a white southern newspaper editor, portrayed a region that lagged behind the nation – socially, culturally and economically. *A Southerner Discovers the South* had an easy-going, engaging style ensured that it was a nationwide bestseller. On his journey through company towns, from dusty crossroads with a single general store to huge commercial farms, from the stately homes of politicians to the porches of newspaper editors, Daniels wrestled with the thorny issues that concerned Americans when they thought about the South in this decade. Soil erosion, sharecropping, debt, politics, poverty and riches, Coca Cola, tenancy, farming co-operatives, voting, illiteracy, migration, education, towns, plantations, factories, democracy – all were explored. Race was woven throughout the study. Daniels had surveyed the total situation of the South and included, at least partially, the black southerner.

Nevertheless it is curious that Brown did not react like Wilhelmina Roberts to Daniels' descriptions of black southerners. After all, by 1938, Brown had a reputation as a fierce critic of racial stereotyping.⁵ In 1937, the year Daniels toured the South for his book material, Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction* was published, analysing the way that stereotypes – “that the Negro is all this, or that, or the other” – had evolved to support social policy from colonial times through the immensely popular escapism of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* in 1937.⁶

Wilhelmina Roberts was the daughter of a black postman who ran a photography business in Columbia, South Carolina. She bristled at Daniels' descriptions of African Americans. For example, in Natchez, Daniels described a syphilitic farm worker: “...a young yellow fellow, with notched teeth and eyes in which pupil and iris and ball all seemed to run together in a grayish brown jelly.”⁷ His description of women back country Georgia might also have caused offence:

⁵ See chapter one for a discussion on Brown's criticism of stereotypes.

⁶ Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, 1-2.

⁷ Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 219.

the conventional flap-breasted, narrow-hipped, straight shanked Negro women are merely the least attractive of an infinite variety. Undoubtedly there is a possibility that such creatures predominate. They look even now like slaves and like the creatures to bear slaves.

Daniels failed to provide balance in his book; portraits of professional middle-class black southerners were absent, as Miss Roberts pointed out in a subsequent letter sent on Christmas Day 1938.⁸

Brown's only stated criticism was that "Mr Daniels' chats with Negroes are too few for this reader."⁹ In the early 1940s, he attempted to remedy Daniels' omission by gathering the views of black southerners for a book that would respond to *A Southerner Discovers the South*. Although Brown's *A Negro Looks at the South* was eagerly awaited, it did not follow Daniels into the bestseller lists. Announced as shortly appearing by *The New York Times* in 1942, it was not published until 2007, its title by then an anachronism and its interest purely as a historical record of an American South long gone.

Below, I examine the relationship between Daniels and Brown, although there is no evidence that they ever met. Through an analysis of Daniels' and Brown's books, the circumstances of their production, the authors' motivation and their content, I explore the reasons why Brown (and other black intellectuals) concentrated on the strengths of *A Southerner Discovers the South* and ignored its failings; the insulting sketches and the omission of African Americans who had achieved a measure of success in the suffocating world of the segregated South. I examine Sterling Brown's decision to write a response to *A Southerner Discovers the South*, a sort of ethnography or travelogue written from a black perspective. The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) had brought Brown into contact mainly with white southern conservatives, this book would find him responding to a white southerner who was considered to be a liberal.

⁸ Wilhelmina Roberts to Jonathan W. Daniels, 25 Dec 1938, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

⁹ Brown, "South on the Move," 366-69.

Morton Sosna defines ‘liberals’ broadly as anyone who considered that there was a “serious maladjustment of race relations in the South.”¹⁰ However, Raymond Williams points out that ‘liberal’ is also used in the sense of “a group term for Progressive or Radical opinions.”¹¹ John Egerton notes that individuals labelled ‘liberals’ in the North were often considered to be dangerous radicals in the South.¹² Furthermore, southern white liberals in this period took differing stances on key issues including the role of the federal government, education, voting rights, racial violence and lynching; and their liberalism waxed and waned in response to changing circumstances. My examination of Daniels’ and Brown’s efforts to document the South provides an opportunity to explore the extent to which a black intellectual and a white southern liberal could find common ground in this period.

Setting the Scene

Jonathan Daniels and Sterling Brown were similar in age, both born at the turn of the century. They shared an abiding interest in the South and the welfare of its people. Both had strong connections to Washington D.C. and to the South. During their MA Studies, Brown at Harvard, and Daniels at the University of North Carolina, they had each been influenced by mid-Western social realist literature and they shared a disdain for the “sugar and cinnamon of the earlier American literature.”¹³ Brown and Daniels balanced a sense of duty with a desire to be creative; Daniels’ novel *Clash of Angels* was published in 1930, Brown’s first poetry collection had appeared a couple of years later. As the 1930s unfolded, they were pulled away from creative work and into service as public intellectuals and they shared a sense of frustration about the diversion. Both were involved in the FWP, Daniels at state level in North

¹⁰ Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South : Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York ; Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1977), viii.

¹¹ Williams, *Keywords*, 159.

¹² John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill, N.C. : University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 283.

¹³ A-0313: Interview with Jonathan Worth Daniels, 9-11 Mar 1977. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007).

Carolina and Brown at the national office. They each followed in the footsteps of principled and strong-minded fathers with high expectations for their sons.

Brown and Daniels' fathers had very different opinions on race, however. I have set out the beliefs of Sterling Nelson Brown in chapter one. Josephus Daniels was the editor of the influential *Raleigh News and Observer*. In 1933 his son Jonathan took on the role of Editor whilst his father was posted to Mexico as the US Ambassador. Father and son were very close. They exchanged frequent affectionate letters. From the outset, Jonathan gave racial justice a high profile, and this was a marked departure from his father's policies. Born in North Carolina just before Emancipation, Daniels's* father Josephus Daniels believed in white superiority and actively promoted the disfranchisement, subjugation and social separation of blacks after Reconstruction. From 1894, he controlled the *Raleigh News and Observer* and directed its editorial support for the Democratic Party in a period in which it battled a Populist and Republican alliance. He was a powerful figure with a platform through the *News and Observer* and via his influence on other newspaper editors in the region.

Historian C. Vann Woodward described Josephus Daniels as "the typical progressive reformer [who] rode to power in the South on a disfranchising or white-supremacy movement."¹⁴ He was a driving force in the instigation of the Democratic Party's 1898 overthrow of the elected municipal government in Wilmington, North Carolina. The Party deployed propaganda in the press and sent speakers across the region to inflame public opinion against blacks and white Republicans. Josephus Daniels reported that Democratic Party leader Simmons was

a genius in putting everybody to work—men who could write, men who could speak, and men who could ride—the last by no means the least important.¹⁵

* 'Daniels' refers to Jonathan W. Daniels hereafter.

¹⁴ Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 91.

¹⁵ Josephus Daniels, quoted in "1898 Wilmington Race Riot, Final Report," <http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/1898-wrrc/report/chapter3a.pdf>

The 'men who could ride' were the Red Shirts and white Government Union men who 'rode out' to intimidate black voters and to press white voters to vote Democratic. This culminated in a race riot in which up to sixty people died, twenty were banished from the area, and over two thousand fled. The victims were successful African Americans or those who had openly complained of intimidation, and white Republicans or Populists who had benefitted from the black vote. The black community in the area was subsequently subject to economic oppression, housing segregation and disenfranchisement. From 1913, Daniels served as Secretary of the Navy under Woodrow Wilson and in that position and as a member of the cabinet, he pushed the Southern Democrats' perspective on race relations in the federal arena, and supported the introduction of segregation to the civil service.¹⁶

Josephus wrote to his son from Mexico in 1936:

equal that is the word: On that word I plant myself and my party the equal right of every child born on earth to have the opportunity "to burgeon out all that there is within him."

Like the majority of his ancestors and his contemporaries in the South (and many white Northerners), he did not consider that African American children should be included in those opportunities.¹⁷ Father and son had a tacit understanding that their ideas about race were different. Daniels wrote to his father on the subject shortly after he took over the editorship, having published editorials on race prejudice in the courts and racial violence: "I hope that I am not making your paper too much of a colored boy's friend."¹⁸ Interviewed many years later Daniels said:

I didn't become interested in the welfare of the blacks because of any negrophile sense. I felt the same about them that I felt about oppressed and exploited white men.¹⁹

His interest in African Americans was as a group that was poor and oppressed, not specifically as a *racially* oppressed minority. He was against

¹⁶ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights : The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68.

¹⁷ Josephus Daniels to Jonathan W. Daniels, Unknown Date 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

¹⁸ Jonathan W. Daniels to Josephus Daniels, 1 Jul 1933, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

¹⁹ Interview with Jonathan Worth Daniels, 9-11 Mar 1977.

racial violence, in favour of education for all of the citizens of the South, and in favour of fair employment conditions. Daniels and Brown had a shared curiosity about ordinary people's lives. Their writing style was similar, down to earth yet lively and engaging. They were principled men with a strong desire to see justice done, and to see an improvement in people's lives. Their interpretation of what that meant in relation to the black southerner was very different.

In documenting the South, Daniels and Brown were part of wider trend. In the score of years following the 1930 publication of the Nashville Agrarians' *I'll Take My Stand* and Howard W. Odum's *An American Epoch* (see chapter two), a veritable library of books and newspaper accounts was published about the South, written by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, newspaper editors, communists and liberals, northerners and southerners, black and white Americans. Charles S. Johnson published *Growing Up in the Black Belt* in 1941.²⁰ The following year saw the publication of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, with photographs by Walker Evans; Will Alexander Percy's nostalgic *Lanterns on the Levee*; Arthur Raper and Ira Reid's *Sharecroppers All*; and Wilbur J. Cash's momentous interrogation of the southern psyche, *The Mind of the South*. In 1942, J. Saunders Redding's *No Day of Triumph* and Virginius Dabney's *Below the Potomac* appeared.

In fact, as Thomas D. Clarke demonstrates, the trend in documenting the South had a longer history. The unique nature of antebellum slavery had drawn the first chroniclers. In the early part of the twentieth century, the South still looked markedly different from the rest of the country with its "lack of industry, undeveloped resources, bumptious self-seeking politicians." Farm tenancy and sharecropping were increasing and in cultural terms the South could not or would not keep up with the rest of the nation. These differences drew a stream of sociologists, reporters, political observers and economists who

²⁰ See also discussion of Charles S. Johnson in chapters one, three, and four.

came to view firsthand relations between Negro and white, to assess the damages of tenant farming, to visit with the well-publicised Southern demagogues, and to attend all sorts of public meetings.²¹

The Great Depression brought a desire to understand the country through documentary realism and articles, factual books and novels about the region multiplied.²²

Daniels and Brown both wished to tackle inequality in the South through their writing, but the differences in their family histories and beliefs would ultimately override any similarities between them. Whilst Brown's father, Sterling Nelson Brown, had been committed to racial equality, Josephus Daniels was a prominent advocate for white supremacy and participated in legal and extralegal campaigns to ensure black Americans remained in submission. Daniels wanted to improve the treatment for black southerners but this was because he believed in improving the situation of the poor and uneducated, not because he believed that black Americans were deserving of equal rights as citizens. However, in the context of a growing interest in documenting the South, both writers held a shared objective and that was to use their powers of observation and their writing skills to advocate greater fairness in the region and in the treatment of black southerners.

Daniels Sets Out to 'Discover' the South

Daniels' excitement in advance of his 1937 trip bubbled over in a letter that he wrote to his parents shortly before his departure. He explained that his journey was important because although he was of the South, he did not really know it: "I expect to see for the first time the South I've been talking about very cockily for a long time."²³ He felt that it was important to take his responsibilities as an editor seriously and saw his journey as an opportunity to test his own opinions on economic, social and political matters. Newspapers were hugely influential, carrying news and authoritative opinion

²¹ Thomas D. Clark, *Travels in the New South : A Bibliography*. 2, 2 (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1962), ix-x.

²² Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*.

²³ Jonathan W. Daniels to Josephus and Addie Daniels, 28 Apr 1937, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

across the South in the 1930s and 1940s, during a time when electricity rarely reached farms and cabins, and radio had a far shakier foothold than in other parts of the country.

The extent to which Daniels was able to challenge his own preconceptions about the region is questionable. Frank Owsley, one of the Nashville Agrarians (a conservative hostile to Daniels' portrait of the region), pointed out the breakneck speed of his journey.²⁴ He doubted that Daniels could really 'discover' the South on a jaunt which he covered such vast distances in a short time period. Later historians agreed with Owsley, for example, Jennifer Ritterhouse concluded in 2010 that Daniels' journalistic itinerary and the letters of introduction he carried demonstrate that "he had a mental geography of his South well mapped before he left Raleigh" "he looked for and saw much that he expected to see."²⁵ His preconceptions were not shaken in any way by his journey.

The Daniels book was plotted as a straightforward narrative, the story of his travels in his Ford Plymouth. On the simple line-drawn map reproduced in the book, the star shaped pattern of his route represented a journey of over five thousand miles around ten southern states, which he began on 5th May 1938 and hoped to complete in two months. He took the reader through regions with varied characteristics: the mill towns of the upper South like King's Mountain and Gastonia; the scarred farming lands of the Deep South, their ecology damaged perhaps beyond repair; and the lush cotton land of the alluvial Mississippi Delta.

Within his first chapter, Daniels set out the experiences that he felt gave him licence to comment on race: his experiences under the care of Harriet, one of the family's black servants, and the location of the family home in a neighbourhood in decline, which gradually became more mixed in terms of race and class. Their home was adjacent to Shaw University and their

²⁴ Frank L. Owsley, "Mr. Daniels Discovers the South," *Southern Review* 4 (1939): 666.

²⁵ Jennifer Ritterhouse, "Dixie Destinations: Rereading Jonathan Daniels's *A Southerner Discovers the South*," *Southern Spaces* (2010), http://www.southernspaces.org/2010/dixie-destinations-rereading-jonathan-daniels-southerner-discovers-south#content_top.

neighbour was a mulatto, Wesley Hoover. Although his profession - successful saloon owner - made him perhaps suspect in moral terms, he was, nevertheless, "a good neighbor and man."²⁶

Daniels' introduction contained many of the stereotypes described by Sterling Brown in his 1933 article, "Negro Character as seen by White Authors."²⁷ Harriet, one of the Daniels' two family servants, was "yellow and wise" and looked "all that the conventional Mammy was supposed to be." Like the 'type' Brown defined as the 'Exotic Primitive,' she "possessed knowledge and interests which made childhood under her guiding a dark excitement of endless variety." She took the young boy on a visit to her friend's deathbed where he listened avidly to an account of a visiting angel. When later questioned by his mother about his day, he knew that he should not reveal what he had witnessed. Here the racial 'other' revealed an unfamiliar world to a young white southern initiate, a world of which his middle-class white parents would not approve and must be kept secret. The 'Exotic Primitive' stereotype reappeared as Daniels started his journey at a graduation ceremony at the black Abraham Lincoln School High School. He mocked the class valedictorian who "looked like a stupid black satyr, and the girls, whose very skins wedded voodoo and pagan" who were gathered around him to sing.

Within his introductory chapter, Daniels also told of the Smathers, a poor white family who lived near his childhood home, and he recalled a vivid memory of

Ma Smathers sprawled drunk and sleeping on her front steps and her dirty youngest seeking unaided the vast breasts and the milk they contained.²⁸

He wrestled with stereotypes about poor white southerners, remembering that when he read Erskine Caldwell (whose 1932 book *Tobacco Road* had offended many Southerners), he thought of Ma Smathers:

²⁶ Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 4.

²⁷ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," 179-209. See analysis in chapter one.

²⁸ Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 2-3, 11, 7.

It did not occur to me then that anybody would regard Ma Smathers as a typical Southern woman in a typically Southern condition. But they did. Put a slut in a book about the South and there are patriots who will regard it as a slander on the whole region and every female in it and there are non-Southerners who will accept it as a panoramic photograph of Dixie.²⁹

Daniels was reacting against images of southern poverty that appeared more often in print, including those taken by Margaret Bourke for her joint project with Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937).³⁰ Although the book was a bestseller, some critics denounced it as “sentimental slush,” that generalized the poverty of southerners to the point where it was the only ‘reality,’ and ignored misery and deprivation elsewhere in the country.³¹ Daniels wanted a more balanced portrait to emerge from his journey. He believed that the region and its inhabitants were stereotyped in the northern press and that activists criticised the South for failings that were all too common in their own regions.

And yet, *A Southerner Looks at the South* contained more than one stereotype of African Americans. In Greenville, Mississippi, Daniels met with authors David Cohn, Roark Bradford and Will Alexander Percy. Cohn and Bradford described Percy as the frequent hapless victim of blacks towards whom he felt a misguided responsibility. The characters described fitted the stereotype of the ‘Brute Negro’ that Sterling Brown had outlined in 1933. Brown had explained that under slavery, authors “stressing the mutual affection between the races looked upon the Negro as a docile mastiff” because they wanted to show the civilizing influence of slavery. However, from the Reconstruction, in writings of authors like Thomas Dixon, “the mastiff turned into a mad dog. ‘Damyanks’, carpetbaggers, scalawags and New England schoolmarms infected him with the rabies.”

In this stereotype, ‘the Negro’ was lustful and sadistic and exploited the kindness of old-fashioned paternalists like Percy. Bradford and Cohn provided a selection of examples of wayward blacks who took advantage of

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

³¹ W. T. Couch, “Landlord and Tenant,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 14, 2 (1938): 312.

Percy's good nature and robbed or insulted him. Daniels described Percy as similar to a feudal lord in his relationship to his serfs, noting:

He is not concerned for the black man's morals. Indeed, he holds that the Negro is to be judged by entirely different ethical standards than those supposedly applicable to white men.

The implication here was that African Americans did not have the capacity to comply with society's laws and mores, which taken to its logical conclusion implied that they could not function as equal members of society. Ironically, too, (given Brown's definition of the Brute Negro stereotype), Daniels used canine imagery:

I had the feeling that Percy loved Negroes as another gentleman might love dogs and that somehow the fiercer the beast the more he might prefer it.

Another literary stereotype that Sterling Brown had exposed in writings such as those by Thomas Nelson Page was 'The Wretched Freedman,' who was lonely and, without (white) protection, was immensely vulnerable to debasement. When Daniels relayed writer Roark Bradford's tale about a black farmer who was immensely productive when working under a white landlord, but who failed completely when he finally gained ownership of his own parcel of land, he was playing into that stereotype. The lesson was obvious; blacks needed and wanted white supervision to succeed. Jack Sherrard, a plantation owner living near the interracial co-operative farming experiment at Hillhouse, was quick to tell Daniels that:

Three of the niggers down there...came up here and asked Daddy to let them have places here. You know how niggers'll talk to their own kind of white people. They said, 'Yes, sir, they do call you "Mister" down there. Yes, sir, they call us, "Mr. Brown - Mr. Jones." But when there's any work to do, they holler quick, 'Mr. Brown - Mr. Jones!'³²

The message from the white upper classes was clear - neither planters nor their black tenants wanted to leave the old and mutually beneficial ways. As Brown remarked in 1933, there were plenty of soulful reminiscence on the old ways and the 'Contented Slave'

³² Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 173, 77.

designed originally to defend slavery, [was] now a convenient argument for those 'wishing to keep the Negro in his place' – out of great love for him, naturally – believing that he will be happier so.³³

Although contemporary critics and later historians doubted that Jonathan Daniels's perspective on the South could be challenged by a short tour around the southern states, he was hopeful that his journey would test the opinions that he put forward about the region within the *Raleigh News and Observer*. He criticised the way authors and photographers stereotyped poor white southerners, and yet *A Southerner Discovers the South* contained numerous stereotypes of black Americans, which fell into the well-worn categories that Brown had censured within his writing. At their heart, these stereotypes supported an image of propertied white southerners caring for (ungrateful) blacks, who were unable to fend for themselves. Daniels' failure to critique these stereotypes whilst resisting stereotyping when applied to poor whites was partly a response to perceived outside interference in the region's organisation of race relations.

The 'Naturally Undramatic Growth of Better Relations'

Daniels delivered an unequivocal message using the Hillhouse parable, which was that outside intrusion in southern race relations was unwelcome. Although a strong supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal, Daniels disliked what he saw as northern hypocrisy. He wrote to a contact in *Reader's Digest* in January 1938 about "one of the merriest and at the same time significant stories" that he could write about the North. In response to southern trips taken by reporters from the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Colliers* and others, Daniels proposed that he go north and "look at the land of the lookers." He would see

whether there is any slavery in Boston, whether all is flowering fruit trees in the agriculture of upstate New York, and whether vassalage persists in the country that set out to free the slaves.³⁴

³³ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," 186.

³⁴ Jonathan W. Daniels to Carl W. Ferguson, 12 Oct 1938, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

Although Daniels emphasized that his article would be a gentle ribbing rather than a resentful rant, he was genuinely averse to interference by northerners or the federal government and to the double standards of those who criticised misery in the South that he believed could equally be found elsewhere. He doubted that outsiders without any real familiarity with the region's traditions could make a contribution.

Daniels worked to resist federal interference in the South. In October 1936, NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White wrote to Daniels seeking his opinion on two congressional bills designed to combat the disenfranchisement of southern blacks. One bill aimed to bar any political party or candidate if they had prevented any voter on the basis of creed, race or colour. The second set out a reduction in the level of congressional representation for states that denied free access to the ballot. White diplomatically told Daniels that he was anxious not to stir up prejudice within the ranks of those who were not yet ready to see African Americans voting or have political influence in the South. When White sought Daniels' assent to the idea that preventing blacks from voting would "continue to harm the white south as well as the negro south through its negation of democracy,"³⁵ it is likely that he knew that Daniels was not in agreement with him on this point. The cautious nature of Daniels' reply of 2nd November supports this interpretation:

I feel with increasing certainty that the welfare of the two races in the South is dependent upon the growth of a sense of good feeling in the South. I do not believe that any national legislation undertaking to strengthen the Negro's position by law would be effective and I think that every radical act creates controversy which retards the naturally undramatic growth of better relations.³⁶

He went further and admitted:

³⁵ Walter White to Jonathan W. Daniels, 29 Oct 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

³⁶ Jonathan W. Daniels to Walter White, 2 Nov 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

The whole question of the Negro in politics disturbs me and, while I do not regard myself as a Simon Legree,³⁷ I do suppose I share some white conservatism in this matter.

Daniels' chief argument was that southern blacks were, through white agency rather than any fault of their own, ignorant and poor and incapable of exercising political rights. They tended to vote en bloc and were susceptible to external pressures. Counselling "well intentioned white and negro men of thoughtfulness" to focus on "immediate, ugly injustice" rather than political participation, Daniels set out his central tenet:

Attitudes of mind will not be swiftly altered and any attempt to alter them by law will not only fail but set back the change which naturally would have taken place.³⁸

In late 1937, Daniels and White exchanged letters about the Wagner-Van Nuys anti-lynching bill.³⁹ Though cordial and respectful, their views stayed on entirely separate paths. White's experiences in exposing lynching,⁴⁰ and the lengths to which the southern establishment went to exclude blacks from political participation led him to believe that federal action was essential. Daniels believed change in the South should be internally generated rather than federally mandated, slow and careful in order to gradually change the views of the southern white majority, and should never proceed as far as racial integration. In terms of federal intervention on lynching, he was out of step with at least one of his fellow newspaper editors. In January 1938, his friend Virginius Dabney, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, wrote to him:

Certainly I agree that the economic situation is extremely important and I do not think that a Federal law will wipe out the evil entirely, unless economic conditions are bettered and the process of education continues. I do feel, however, that Federal legislation will reduce the number of lynchings materially.⁴¹

³⁷ Simon Legree was a brutal plantation owner in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

³⁸ Jonathan W. Daniels to Walter White, 2 Nov 1936.

³⁹ Walter White to Jonathan W. Daniels, 30 Dec 1937, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

⁴⁰ Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York, A.A. Knopf 1929).

⁴¹ Virginius Dabney to Jonathan W. Daniels, 12 Jan 1938, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

Beyond politics, Daniels was aware that the paternalistic relationship between whites and blacks was slipping away. Where it seemed to still exist, he applauded it. He was impressed by the way manager Oscar Johnston ran the vast Delta Pine and Land plantation. He credited the plantation's success to Johnston's paternalistic approach to everything from mule husbandry to the abolition of syphilis in the black workforce. In fact, as Daniels described it, for Johnson there was little difference between his treatment of the mules and his treatment of the 'nigras', it was all about good business: "I don't intend... on this plantation to have a \$250 mule at one end of a plow and a syphilitic nigra at the other."⁴² This anecdote represented a tactic Daniels (and other southern liberals) often employed in relation to the welfare of African Americans and one that he regularly took in his editorials for the *Raleigh News and Observer*, which was to point out the economic benefits for the region in treating its black inhabitants more compassionately.

Daniels regretted the demise of paternalism, which he saw as having served as a protective function for black Americans. He grew up in a home staffed by five black servants who were financially supported by Daniels' family into old age. Interviewed many years later, he described the benefits:

it did put a heart into a relationship even if it didn't put equality into a relationship ... almost all decent white people looked out for their blacks.

With paternalism fading fast, Daniels failed to see a viable alternative. He was dismissive of potential models of interracial co-operation in the South such as Sam Franklin's Hillhouse Co-operative. Franklin and his team had no background in farming and when Daniels first met them discussing electrified fencing he noted, "I had the feeling that I had come upon a conference of Europeans on a desert island in the South Seas." Any success with the Co-operative was attributed to Franklin's guardianship of the 150 members:

These white men and black men, I felt after seeing them and him, remain his children while he, by the greatest individual labor, shows the world that they are men who can by their own cooperative efforts create the security and the well-being of all.

⁴² Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 190.

Although Daniels mentioned labour and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) intermittently, he failed to spell out how or whether labour unions could change the South significantly. He introduced William Mitch as an outsider sent down to the South by John L. Lewis, leader of the CIO, because Lewis “lacked faith in either the character or the intelligence of the indigenous labor leaders.” He briefly described Mitch’s attempts to unionise white and black miners and his personal charisma. In contrast, his account of his meeting with industrialist Charles DeBardeleben occupied six pages and although he described DeBardeleben as bitter, he also observed wistfully that he was “one of the last of the old time masters of men out of the old time South” ... “a paternalist who has succeeded in paternalism,” and ensured that his miners survived the depression without reliance on government relief. Daniels noted that this was not uncommon in southern agriculture:

Sensible Negroes still attach themselves to particular white folks, and sometimes it is hard to tell whether the whites or the blacks in such a persisting relationship are the slaves.⁴³

Daniels believed that, left to their own devices, southerners would gradually find a satisfactory solution to the region’s problems, including race relations. The northern press, lobbying organisations like the NAACP, and the federal government encouraged emotional reactions and engendered controversy, which Daniels argued only delayed changes which would otherwise take place gradually. Daniels refused to support federal legislation on voting and believed African Americans were unfit to participate in the political process. Neither would he support an anti-lynching bill. Daniels could not see a viable alternative to white paternalism in the South and did not give serious attention to labour organisations or other innovators who were exploring different ways of living and working such as a co-operative approach to agriculture. He paid no attention to African Americans’ views on these topics.

⁴³ Ibid., 149, 274, 80, 86.

Inclusions and omissions

Daniels promoted his book as an impartial account of his conversations with many different Southerners. These included governors, professors, patriots, labor leaders, industrialists, educators, engineers, chemists, foresters, and physicians. He did not stick to the educated, to the upper or middle classes. He also talked to hitchhikers, tenant farmers, filling station operators, hillbillies, planters, poets, bartenders, Syrians, and Cajuns. He claimed that he also spoke “everywhere to Negroes” but in fact, as Brown pointed out in his review, these talks were rare. The only appointment he made in advance to interview African Americans was at the Tuskegee Institute; and he provided no description at all of the institution. Neither did he visit other well-known African American teachers or leaders at Fisk or Atlanta Universities, the editors of black newspapers such as Cornelius Adolphus Scott at the *Atlanta Daily World* or individuals such as Gordon Hancock involved with the Commission on Interracial Co-operation.⁴⁴

There were other omissions. Scottsboro, Alabama was on Daniels’ planned itinerary. Here, nine young African Americans had been arrested for the alleged rape of two white women on a freight train from Chattanooga to Memphis on 25th March 1931.⁴⁵ Scottsboro was a small, sleepy place before this incident brought it notoriety. The purpose of Daniels’ visit could only have been in relation to the alleged crimes and the subsequent Alabama trials of the young men, which were held from 1931 to 1937 and were the talk of the country. Daniels made only a passing reference to them in his chapter “Mountain and Mouse.”⁴⁶ His exclusion of Scottsboro may have been because he did not want to alienate southern readers. As Brown noted in his review, Daniels used a casual tone to “disarm Southern prejudices,” whilst taking southerners to task for the more extreme examples of their ill treatment of African Americans in slavery, Reconstruction and through the

⁴⁴ J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy : Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 14.

⁴⁵ See also Introduction in relation to Scottsboro.

⁴⁶ Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 273-74.

terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan which he compared to the fascist brown shirts of Germany and the black shirts of Italy.⁴⁷

Daniels did discuss another racial incident within the same chapter, however, and in relating the tale made his only (indirect) mention of the most well-known southern black college, the Tuskegee Institute. Over drinks with journalist Charles F. Edmundson in the bar of the Tutwiler Hotel in Birmingham, Alabama, Daniels was told about a group of blacks who had resisted foreclosure on their property. They were in debt and the property in question was a mule and a cow. Shots were fired and officers of the law suffered minor injuries, the blacks were more seriously hurt and were taken to the hospital at Tuskegee. A white mob, on the hunt for the blacks in school buses, tracked them down at the Tuskegee hospital where administrators handed them over to the mob. The black group were taken to jail and one later died. Edmundson could not understand why the blacks at Tuskegee hospital had not contacted the “right white people,” whilst Daniels thought that they could not appreciate “the dry hysteria” affecting “even the Negroes most remote from the dangers of the mob in the Black Belt when mobs (or ‘posses’) run past in school buses.”⁴⁸

Like any careful journalist, Daniels set out to verify the story that he was told. In this instance, he wrote to Walter White at the NAACP:

I wonder if you could tell me just what the circumstances were surrounding the delivery of the wounded Negroes to the posses by the officials at Tuskegee. The man who told me the story of this manhunt felt some bitterness that the officials at Tuskegee had not got in touch with the Governor – or someone higher up – and done something other than merely informing the excited local officers and turning the man over to them to bleed to death in jail.⁴⁹

White was away but his deputy Roy Wilkins wrote straight back to Daniels to confirm that the NAACP had nothing on file of that nature. He recalled some accusations but felt that they were merely rumours and believed that the news agencies would not have concealed such a fact if it were true. Neither the

⁴⁷ Brown, "South on the Move," 366-68.

⁴⁸ Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 274-75.

⁴⁹ Jonathan W. Daniels to Walter White, 7 Feb 1938, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

Birmingham daily papers nor the African American papers had mentioned the place of arrest.⁵⁰ Daniels did not change the draft of his book however, and it went to print with only this negative incident associated with Tuskegee. When Edmundson told Daniels that the capitulation of the Tuskegee administration to the mob was “typical” of that institution’s approach, Daniels had queried “you mean an educational ideal true to Ole Massa” and noted that he had been impressed by Tuskegee.⁵¹ He was not sufficiently impressed by the institution to write even a paragraph about its features within *A Southerner Discovers the South*.

Daniels did not believe that African Americans were his intellectual equals and he did not socialise with them. Apart from some cautious letters to Walter White, there is little correspondence with blacks to be found in Daniels’ papers during this period. He exchanged a few letters with Dr James E. Shepard, the conservative President of North Carolina College for Negroes. Daniels wrote to thank Shepard for a complimentary letter about his editorial on southern wage differentials and noted:

it is so easy for men in your group and mine to lose themselves in misunderstanding on the two sides of the terribly difficult problem of our happy relationship in the South.

His letter reads as a compliment to Shepard for not agitating for swift change to the status quo: “Of course we cannot advance swiftly and impatience may keep us from moving at all.” He went on:

But despite occasional lapses and some lags, I am impressed by the distance we have gone in North Carolina in the improvement of the relations of the races, an improvement in which men like yourself have played so important a part.⁵²

Shepard was a cautious conservative and this was the only ‘type’ of black American with whom Daniels sought any contact. Looking back in 1991, sociologist Hylan Lewis described the role of the college presidents of state schools at that time:

⁵⁰ Roy Wilkins to Jonathan W. Daniels, 11 Feb 1938, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

⁵¹ Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 276.

⁵² Jonathan W. Daniels to James E. Shepard, 10 Nov 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

they were the riding bosses of the plantations. . . They played a dual role, dual agents. They were agents of the quote, "power structure." There was Hale at Tennessee State, Watson at Arkansas ... Shepard at North Carolina ... they were trustworthy and able to keep the natives down.⁵³

Daniels failed to consult with educated black southerners (for example, academics or newspaper editors) to find out what their views were on southern affairs and race relations. He ignored the controversy ignited by the alleged rape of two white women by nine black boys at Scottsboro although the crimes and trials were causing an international uproar. He included a racial incident at Tuskegee but in effect used it to criticise hospital officials who handed over a group of blacks to an angry white mob instead of appealing to the Governor. Daniels demonstrated his belief in the continuing value of white paternalism: these black southerners failed to appeal to the 'right sort of white people' and therefore could not protect the lower-class blacks who were at risk from the mob. Daniels' correspondence with African Americans was restricted to cautious responses to entreaties by Walter White to support civil rights and polite exchanges with conservative black college presidents. Daniels' support for segregation prevented him from meaningful exchanges with educated black Americans like Sterling Brown, and there is no evidence to suggest that he considered such men to be his equal.

'Preserving Racial Integrity'

Daniels viewed 'social equality,' by which he meant total equality and free association between the races, as completely undesirable. He was committed to maintaining segregation. As Albert Murray later pointed out, white southerners like Daniels and Faulkner eulogized on the security, warmth and love they received from their Mammies and the influence they had over their behaviour and development, but never for a moment thought "to take some little taffy and chocolate child to [their] bosom as my aunt Hagar did to [them]." They did not consider that the Mammy, the woman they idealised as

⁵³ A-0361: Interview with Hylan Lewis, 13 Jan 1991. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007).

representing motherhood at its finest, was subject to segregation and shown no respect outside their home. Murray asked “how can fellows like you be so enthusiastic about her and yet so ambivalent and hesitant about her brothers and sisters?”⁵⁴

An incident that took place the year before Daniels made his southern journey illustrates his conservatism in relation to segregation. During the 1936 presidential campaign, James W. Ford, an African American and the Communist candidate for vice president, spoke at a rally and was then honoured at a dinner in a black hotel in Durham. A Professor of English at Chapel Hill, Franklin Carl Erickson, attended both events. Frank Smethurst, the managing editor of the *News and Observer*, protested against Erickson’s actions in his column, noting that he had “no right to engage in even purely personal practices which offend the spirit of our laws and the conventions of our people.” A few days later, Daniels issued a similar denunciation, noting that in the South:

men believe, quite apart from prejudice, that the public welfare will best be served by preserving racial integrity and that the best way to preserve racial integrity is to keep the races wholly apart in their social relationships.⁵⁵

He virtually called for Erickson’s dismissal, noting that the university should have “no room for men who have no social sense of their participation in the welfare of a great institution.”⁵⁶ In an exchange of letters with Oswald Garrison Villard, NAACP board member, Daniels was scathing about outsiders interfering in the South’s affairs, noting that the southerner was “confronted with the actual situation as well as a theory.” He argued that in seeking to develop amongst ordinary southerners “an attitude of mind shaped in justice and good will,” sensitivity was required rather than action likely to offend the majority.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Albert Murray, *South to a Very Old Place* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 53.

⁵⁵ Charles W. Eagles, *Jonathan Daniels and Race Relations: The Evolution of a Southern Liberal* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 45-46.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Jonathan W. Daniels to Oswald Garrison Villard, 7 Nov 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

Various Chapel Hill academics (and friends) urged Daniels to think clearly about his stance. Economist E. L. Bernstein summarised the situation:

For the phantasy of equal social rights for Negroes, some liberals and radicals would sacrifice the reality of economic rights for Negroes (and whites, of course).⁵⁸

This notion that pushing forward on social equality would damage progress in the economic arena or in the legal system or in education was one Daniels himself often voiced in this period. But Bernstein still queried why Erickson's choice of a dinner companion merited editorial discussion. William T. Couch, head of the University of North Carolina Press, wrote to Daniels privately:

Do you really believe that no white person can eat with a Negro without injury to somebody? Now don't hurl any anathema at me. I am writing in a friendly spirit not expecting to change your opinions, but simply to register with you the fact that I think you have gone haywire in this case.⁵⁹

Daniels answered that in relation to 'the Negro', he was what many of their friends "would call reactionary." He accepted that perhaps amalgamation in the future might be inevitable given the close quarters in which white and black southerners lived. Furthermore, he was aware that scholars argued there was no superior race. However, he insisted:

I hold to the faith that the happiness of the South, white and black, will best be preserved by a stern insistence upon the separation of the races.... I honestly believe that the color line should be sternly drawn. I set this down in order that if it be considered treason to liberalism, my confession may be entered.⁶⁰

Although university President Frank Porter Graham told the University Trustees: "If Professor Erickson has to go on a charge of eating with another human being, then I will have to go first,"⁶¹ other white liberals of the South shared Daniels' opinion that reform efforts should be directed at economic matters rather than social change and his 'stern insistence' that segregation could not be abolished.

⁵⁸ E. M. Bernstein to Jonathan W. Daniels, 30 Oct 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

⁵⁹ William T. Couch to Jonathan W. Daniels, 31 Oct 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

⁶⁰ Jonathan W. Daniels to William T. Couch, 2 Nov 1936, Jonathan Daniels Papers #3466.

⁶¹ Frank Graham, quoted in "Education - Dr. Frank," *Time Magazine*, 22 Oct 1945.

In his study of southern liberal journalists, historian John Thomas Kneebone demonstrates that although there were differences in their views, they were unanimous in their opposition to a dismantling of the Jim Crow system during the 1930s. Kneebone examined the writings of Gerald W. Johnson, George Fort Milton, Virginius Dabney, Ralph McGill and Hodding Carter. Although Eagles, Daniels' biographer, argued that he looked down the road that the South would take and tried to lead the region in that direction, Kneebone's thesis was that this group of journalists did not believe that the road would lead to a civil rights movement mobilised by black protest. Their perception was that change in the South would come through the leadership of educated white liberals who would advocate for improvements in economic conditions, education, employment and the legal system. These improvements, particularly within the economy, would alleviate racial tensions.⁶²

Kneebone argues that southern white journalists interpreted unfolding events in the 1920s and 1930s in light of their understanding of the past. They viewed slavery as a benevolent institution in which the master held a paternalistic interest in the welfare of the slaves, and saw abolitionists and irresponsible politicians as responsible for the poor state of southern race relations which they construed as directly caused by Radical Reconstruction. The stories their families told about the War and Reconstruction beget within them a strong fear of racial conflict and accentuated their desire for a gradualist approach. Although the Depression alerted them to the economic distress of the South's lower classes, this anxiety about conflict led them to fear unionism and black activism. They preferred to believe that industrial development would bring gradual economic progress, black southerners would increasingly move to the cities, where they would enter the industrial economy and race relations would improve.⁶³

⁶² Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944*, xvi, 72-75, 159-60, 72.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 92-95, 12, 75.

Shocked by the Depression, southern white journalists were initially able to put aside their belief that outsiders could not enforce changes on the South and welcome Roosevelt's attempts to make changes through the New Deal. However, by Roosevelt's second term, they were frightened by his move to respond to the demands of those who elected him: the poor, labour, black Americans and city-dwellers. This was exacerbated when Roosevelt attempted to purge conservatives from the southern Democratic Party, and change the make-up of the Supreme Court to justices more favourable to his policies. Influenced by Howard Odum's scheme for regional planning, the journalists favoured rational government of the South led by enlightened white liberals. Thus they participated in the Southern Policy Committee, which was made up largely of white liberals, but most (including Daniels) stayed away from the first meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) in November 1938, which included a diverse range of up to 1,500 participants including tenant and sharecropper farmers, labor groups and a substantial minority of black southerners.⁶⁴

Both Kneebone and Reed argue that the SCHW was significantly bolder in its approach to equality than previous liberal organisations. However, the deliberations in November 1938 were not radical. Some criticism was directed at the conference because a small number of communists were present. The most controversial aspect of the SCHW came when police in Birmingham arrived on the third day of the meeting to enforce Jim Crow seating arrangements. The Conference resolved not to convene in the future in a city that would require segregation. Southern journalists reacted angrily to the resolution. The *Times-Dispatch* comment exemplified their responses:

In a region as conservative as the South, reform moves slowly and through evolutionary processes.... Attempts to drive the people into chaotic changes are almost uniformly unsuccessful.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 153-72; Linda Reed, *Simple Decency & Common Sense : The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 15.

⁶⁵ Richmond Times Dispatch, 25 November 1938, 8, cited in Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944*, 172.

Daniels' editorial took a similar line, warning that the resolution "placed emphasis upon the one thing certain to angrily divide the South."⁶⁶

Daniels was considered a liberal because of his persistent interest in poverty, inequality and the unfair treatment of black southerners. His writing was concerned with low pay, unhealthy living conditions and their effect on public health, run down schools, and racial violence. He was strongly against social equality between the races, as he did not believe that blacks should have equal standing with whites. This was partly a class perspective in that he felt that the poor and uneducated were not equipped to fully participate in a democratic society. Speaking in old age, Daniels' views were largely the same:

The saddest thing in the world is that the oppressed generally are the inferior. I suppose it's a natural thing, but you like to think that the oppressed would be presidents of the United States if they weren't oppressed, but I'm afraid that inferiority is a basis for inequality. I'm talking about within each race.⁶⁷

The southern 'liberal' was, in fact, not at all liberal in matters of race. In 2010, historian Jennifer Ritterhouse described *A Southern Discovers the South* as "written from the perspective of a privileged and conflicted white southern liberal."⁶⁸ Daniels wrote from a position of class and race privilege but there is no evidence in his book or in his correspondence of the time that he experienced any conflict about his own position. On the contrary, he was adamant that his own views about the South and its race relations were justified and that the future would be shaped by white southern liberals like himself. By the time of his book's publication, southern liberalism was beginning to take on a new shape and the journalists who still saw themselves as leading the way were largely left behind.

⁶⁶ Ritterhouse, "Dixie Destinations."

⁶⁷ Interview with Jonathan Worth Daniels, 9-11 Mar 1977.

⁶⁸ Ritterhouse, "Dixie Destinations."

‘South on the Move’

Sterling Brown reviewed *A Southerner Discovers the South* alongside *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* by H. C. Nixon in December 1938. Both authors argued for solutions to the entrenched poverty in the region, in order to generate improvements to race relations. Brown concluded his review with praise for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which Nixon had sponsored alongside President Frank Graham of the University of North Carolina, and sociologist Arthur Raper. He saw real potential following the election of two African Americans to office, the Conference’s endorsement of federal anti-lynching legislation and criticism of segregation. Brushing aside conservative disapproval, he heralded the conference as a sign that change was stirring in the South: “The hind wheel may be off and the axle is dragging, but the old cart is a moving along.”⁶⁹ Although Brown’s review of *A Southerner Discovers the South* was enthusiastic, its last paragraph neatly captures the enormous differences between his views and those of Daniels in relation to segregation, the involvement of the federal government, and the role of African Americans themselves in tackling the problems of the South.

The idea for a black response to *A Southerner Discovers the South* came from a young publisher at Doubleday Doran, John Woodburn, who decided to commission the book in 1940. He discussed potential writers on a number of occasions with Walter White, and, in June 1940, White wrote to Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Vice-President at Doubleday Doran, about “a book written by a Negro to parallel Jonathan Daniels’ *A Southerner Discovers the South*.” He strongly recommended Sterling Brown’s appointment, explaining that Brown had

an objectivity of approach, an ability to get beneath the surface of people ... and a broad understanding which, coupled with very real ability as a writer, should cause him to do a magnificent book.⁷⁰

White’s lobbying was successful and Brown was paid an advance to write what would become *A Negro Looks at the South*.

⁶⁹ Brown, “South on the Move.”

⁷⁰ Walter White to Theodore Roosevelt, 6 Jun 1940, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 9, Folder W.

Tidwell and Sanders, editors of *A Negro Looks at the South* on its eventual publication in 2007, claim that Brown's interest in compiling a response to *A Southerner Discovers the South* had not waned since the book's publication in 1938 and that a Rosenwald grant made it possible for him to initiate the project. Certainly, he would have welcomed the opportunity for further travel in the South. The new book also provided a potential outlet for the material he had gathered during the FWP. It could reach a wide audience and this had been a key objective for Brown and his allies since the early 1930s (see chapters one and two). Furthermore, a book commission provided freedom in terms of experimenting with methodology and expression that had been less available to Brown on his most recent projects at the FWP or within the Carnegie Myrdal Study (see chapters three and four). However, Brown's situation at this time was more complex than depicted by Tidwell and Sanders. He may have felt compelled to take on the book because he had not produced any major publications of his own for some time. Although new poems appeared in *Poetry*, *Esquire*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation* and *The Crisis* in 1938 and 1939, Brown's 1937 Guggenheim Fellowship had not resulted in the novel he had planned about a southern family. And whilst publishers fell over each other in trying to secure the rights to his unfinished novel, they declined to publish his second collection of poetry.⁷¹

Furthermore, Brown may have been driven by financial necessity to take on the new project despite the fact that by 1940, he had a number of onerous commitments. As I have described in chapter four, he had not yet fulfilled his obligations to the Carnegie funded Study of the American Negro and he was simultaneously contracted to The Dryden Press with Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee to edit an ambitious anthology of African American literature. Certainly, he told the Carnegie Myrdal officials that he had been obliged for financial reasons to take on the new book.⁷² On the home front, in the winter of 1940 and into the New Year of 1941, both his wife Daisy and his mother Adelaide were seriously ill. By March 1941, Brown was struggling. His

⁷¹ Farrar and Rinehart, Simon and Schuster, Little, Brown and Company, and Doubleday Doran wrote to him, some repeatedly, to solicit his novel. Sterling A. Brown Papers.

⁷² Sterling A. Brown to Samuel A. Stouffer, 5 Nov 1941.

handwritten response to an invitation to present a paper on "The Negro and his Publisher" at a conference was full of crossed out words and phrases. In it, he spoke of a "disordered desk", the "pressure of numerous responsibilities," apologised for his "negligence in replying" and offered as mitigation "only a confusing and taxing schedule."⁷³

The pressure continued in 1941 and in August, Brown joked to sociologist Guy B. Johnson about *A Negro Looks at the South*: "If I don't meet the Doubleday Doran deadline of 31 December 1941, I have to pay them back a hell of a big advance. Hunh. Befo' I'll do that, I'll fight and go to jail."⁷⁴ In actual fact, he had not really started on the new book. By Autumn 1941, Stanley Burnshaw of The Dryden Press was seriously concerned about delays with Brown's contributions to *The Negro Caravan*. After the successful publication of the *Caravan*, Brown continued to struggle. In March 1942, he wrote to Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling, two southerners he very much admired (and about whom I will write more below). He explained that he was working through hundreds of pages that he had prepared for the Carnegie Myrdal study and simultaneously struggling to work on *A Negro Looks at the South* to fulfil his contract to Doubleday Doran. He was open about how challenging he found the situation: "Riding the two horses is tough enough, even if the river weren't so wide."⁷⁵

In 1942, he was awarded the \$1,500 grant from the Rosenwald Fund (referred to above by Tidwell and Sanders) for a seven-month project to support Brown to write "a book on the Negro in the contemporary South and a book on the Negro in the arts and sports."⁷⁶ The grant would support him to stay in the South after his summer school teaching at Atlanta to carry out the relevant research. Doubleday Doran's original deadline for the book was already six months past when Stanley Burnshaw sent Brown a clipping from the New York Times in June 1942:

⁷³ Martha Gibson to Sterling A. Brown, 3 Mar 1941, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 10, Folder G.

⁷⁴ Sterling A. Brown to Guy B. Johnson, 15 Aug 1941, Guy B. Johnson Papers (#3826) Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁷⁵ Sterling A. Brown to Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling, 5 Mar 1942, Lillian Smith Papers, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁷⁶ William C Haygood to Sterling A. Brown, 17 Apr 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 10, Folder H.

Sterling Brown, Negro poet and Professor of English at Howard University, has written *A Negro Looks at the South*. Doubleday, Doran has taken the book, which evaluates the South economically and sociologically in terms of the Negro, for fall publication.

In his accompanying note Burnshaw wrote of how glad he was “to know that the book which was causing you so much concern is really ready.”⁷⁷ In truth, Brown’s investigations of the current situation in the South were only beginning in earnest and the book would not be published within his lifetime.

Although Brown’s 1938 review of *A Southerner Discovers the South* had been favourable, in his praise for the Southern Conference of Human Welfare there are hints of the differences between him and Jonathan Daniels in terms of their views on segregation, federal government intervention, and the role African Americans themselves would play in defining their future and that of the South. Doubleday Doran hired Brown in 1940 but it is unclear whether he was keen to take on *A Negro Looks at the South*. He was struggling to fulfil a number of challenging professional commitments and there is some evidence to suggest that financial necessity drove him to take on the commission. It was not until the summer of 1942 that he started in earnest on researching for the new book, having missed the original publisher’s deadline of December 1941. *A Negro Looks at the South* finally appeared in 2007, more than sixty years after its intended date of issue and nearly twenty years after Brown’s death. A book intended to be a timely challenge to racial stereotypes and to provoke progress towards democracy for African Americans missed its window of opportunity in terms of timeframe and intended audience. Despite the fact that it was not published in his lifetime, *A Negro Looks at the South* was a powerful response to Daniels and helped to articulate the cultural world of black southerners as I will outline below.

⁷⁷ Stanley Burnshaw to Sterling A. Brown, 5 Jun 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 8, Folder B.

Brown's Fragmented Journeys

Daniels' journey was a swift motoring tour around the southern states over a continuous five-week period in the spring of 1937, and his book was published on 12th July 1938. For Brown, there was no single 'journey' but instead many fragmented journeys: often short, frequently rushed under the pressures of work and family commitments, made frustrating and sometimes frightening by the presence of Jim Crow. He was reliant on segregated public transport or the goodwill of friends to visit his chosen destinations, and he designed his excursions around speaking engagements and teaching commitments. The format of each book reflects the nature of their journeys; Daniels' 'discovery' is a narrative that simply follows his route, Brown's 'look at the South' is organised thematically.

Brown had already gathered a great deal of material, on his travels in the South over the previous twenty years. The main period of travelling for this book, however, began in the summer of 1942 in Atlanta. The substantial essays he wrote about his travels in 1942 relate mainly to Louisiana ("Return of the Native") and Georgia ("And He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word"; "Po' Wanderin' Pildom, Miserus Chile"; "Georgia Nymphs"), or places that he could easily travel to from Atlanta (essays in the "Men of War" section about the Tuskegee Air Base). Whereas Daniels stayed in pleasant hotels, Brown more often made short sojourns from Atlanta University or, for longer trips, made arrangements to stay with black friends or acquaintances. The stresses of living, working and travelling in the segregated South recur time and time again within the book, exemplified by his own experiences and by those of the black southerners he met along the way. Although Brown often described the voyage of discovery to the South that he had made as a young teacher from 1923 to 1929 as an Odyssey (see chapter one), these journeys were, in fact, a truer 'odyssey' and the experience of compiling the material and writing the book became one of his greatest trials.

A Negro Looks at the South builds on the approaches Brown had developed over the previous score of years: particularly in his poetry and criticism and

on the FWP; he attempted to capture direct speech and ‘the big lies’ of oral tradition and legitimate them as evidence about human experience. This method enabled black southerners to participate in the building of the contemporary and historical records about them, an activity from which they were otherwise largely excluded to the restrictions on education, employment and publication for blacks at this time. They could also address some of the omissions and misrepresentation prevalent in the press and in written history. Brown cleverly fused these direct testimonies with the views of educated black social scientists who provided information about the impact of segregation on various aspects of black life.

“Old Man McCorkle,” probably written in 1939 or 1940, recalls a visit made by an ex-slave to Brown’s house in Lincoln, Missouri in the second half of the 1920s. It closely resembles the ex-slave narratives that Brown worked on with John Lomax and subsequently Benjamin Botkin on the FWP. “I Look at the Old South” and “Sister Cities” are in the style of the American Guides. Part travelogue, part oral testimony and living history, *A Negro Looks at the South* reads in sections like a newspaper editorial or opinion piece, in other parts as a lobbying tool for civil rights. Brown included biographical sketches of well-known African Americans like tenor Roland Hayes and accounts of his own experiences as an African American and those of his friends and ex-students. Immensely powerful in parts, the overall effect of the book is somewhat diluted by its disjointed style. Its impact is also diminished by time for in more than a half century since it was written, scholars have understood the importance of the approaches with which Brown was experimenting within scholarship and popular literature.⁷⁸

The form and style of the book, however, were pioneering at the time of writing. Other African Americans (and whites) had also begun to experiment with a documentary approach, with oral testimony and with attempts to meld those with social scientific research. The FWP had facilitated this, both in terms of funding the collection of source material that could be later used and

⁷⁸ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

in enabling some experimentation with new approaches. Claude McKay's *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940) used FWP materials but it was devoid of innovation and made little use of either oral traditions or sociological studies.⁷⁹ Richard Wright used data gathered by Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake in Chicago as background material for his collaboration with photographer Edwin Rosskam *12 Million Black Voices* (1941).⁸⁰ He would provide a sweeping and ascerbic introduction to Cayton and Drake's *Black Metropolis*, which again used interview material from black and white Chicagoans alongside sociological data and interpretation.⁸¹ It was, however, a fairly traditional Chicago School approach and lacked the freshness and poetry of Brown's meshing together of 'folk-say' and more formal 'knowledge' about the southern situation.

In his reportage, Brown continued to dissect the stereotyped stories "that ran on like deep-grooved phonograph records." In "Out of Our Mouths," he countered the prevalent image of black submissiveness by recording a selection of African American opinions and ideas. Brown used the 'living lore' approach that he and folklorist Benjamin Botkin had in common (see chapter two). Brown recorded snippets of conversation overheard on trains and buses, in barbershops, or at newsstands in his notebooks and transcribed them directly without authorial comment. Black southerners grouched about Georgia Governor Talmadge's "woof about" segregation whilst the war was killing soldiers and hostages and women and little children. They talked about segregation in the armed forces, whether they should fight, and the treatment of blacks, especially northerners exposed for the first time to Jim Crow as they travelled to training camps in the South. They praised President Roosevelt, Mrs Roosevelt and the New Deal, whilst criticising cheating landlords closer to home. They mused on Jim Crow: the white boy letting the black boy drink at the water fountain ahead of him at a Louis Armstrong concert: "He was by himself. When they come in threes or fours, they won't do that. Scared of being called 'Nigger-lover.'"

⁷⁹ Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: Dutton, 1940).

⁸⁰ Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: The Viking Press, 1941).

⁸¹ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1945).

Brown described the black professor, thrown off a train and beaten at Tupelo, Mississippi for 'sassin' a white man, and fined for the privilege. Full of humour and defiance, there was plenty of accounts of the idiocies of Jim Crow too: the white man unsure of whether to leave his hat on or take it off when faced with two pale-skinned African American girls in a department store elevator.⁸² A number of other short pieces in the book similarly directly captured dialogue, including "V for Victory" and "Jim Crow Snapshot."⁸³ Much of this 'living lore' related to the impact of World War Two on African Americans and their varied views about their role within it and its effect on their lives.

A Negro Looks at the South also rectified omissions or misrepresentations within the Daniels book. "Sister Cities" (Charleston and Savannah) reads like a travel guide, but it was unlike any other produced in the period because it included information missing from most tourist guides. In each segment, Brown provided a window on the African American experience, sometimes in 'slavery times,' or during Reconstruction, more often contemporaneously under segregation. In an era in which slavery was romanticised or omitted altogether from descriptions of southern society, Brown wrote the slaves back in. Recalling guidebook author Thomas Petigree Lesesne's description of the Old Slave Market in Charleston as mythical, Brown wondered whether he had read Frederic Bancroft's *Slave-Trading in the Old South*, "which lists so many of Charleston's honored surnames as in the business of selling men and women."⁸⁴

Segregation made Brown's experience of the South radically different from Daniels' and he repeatedly drew his readers' attention to the exclusions. At folklorist Joel Chandler Harris's home in Atlanta, Brown and his companion were told by the caretaker that "The Association has told me not to let in the colored." Brown mulled over the image in his mind of Harris "the lonely lad" hanging around the black cabins:

⁸² Brown, Tidwell, and Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South*, 23-33.

⁸³ Ibid., 90-93.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 115-19.

none of them shut to him, listening to every wisp of talk, storing in his memory all the anecdotes and tricks of speech and song, piling up a rich compost as it were to produce those fine flowers that made his fame and fortune.⁸⁵

Viewing the massive granite sculpture of the Confederate generals at Stone Mountain outside Atlanta with friends, Brown noted that their tourist dollars were welcome at the store where the knick-knacks included “a pickaninny immersing his grinning mouth in a hunk of watermelon.” His friend bought all the racist postcards; Brown knew that his objective was to take “as many out of circulation as he could.” And as they left, a car full of “young crackers” tried to drive them off the road, yelling “Get off the road, niggers!”⁸⁶

In “Georgia Nymphs,” he and his travelling companion had a frightening experience on a visit to Mrs. Thompkins, an elderly black woman in a house in backcountry Georgia. Their afternoon was interrupted by a group of young white women swimming in a nearby pond, and Brown and his friend felt a heightening anxiety. The girls changed in Mrs Thompkins’ house, the oldest of them “a strapping buxom blonde, in a scanty pair of trunks and a heavily packed brassiere” looked them over “and then put on her act: a home talent variant of a Mae West grind, gentle bump and all.” Brown and his friend feared the consequences of their close encounter with “five sparsely clad young Dixie belles,” and found later that same day that their fears were well founded:

The town had heard about it.... I could feel the tension in the air: the shimmering heat before the likely storm... I knew they were there, waiting for, begging for, one word, one swaying off the road’s shoulder, one bodily contact, anything to give them a chance.⁸⁷

They escaped from the town as fast as they could, frightened that they would be lynched.

“And/Or” dealt with segregation as tragicomedy as Brown recorded the efforts

⁸⁵ Ibid., 129-30.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 126-29.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 103-08.

of a young black teacher to fulfil the requirements to vote in a small Alabama town. Having taught at a nearby black college for three years, the young man found two white sponsors to vouch for his character at the courthouse but they subsequently avoided him for weeks. Although he met the qualification of “reading and writing any article in the Constitution in the English language,” the registrars and subsequently the judge ruled that he must also own 40 acres of land or \$300 of property as set out in the qualification. The requirement to be able to read and write “OR” qualify on the basis of property was interpreted uniquely by the registrars and the judge who stated that the word “OR” between these two statements meant “AND.” In other words, the young man must satisfy both qualifications. The judge eventually backed down and he was permitted to register to vote. The short story concluded with a request from the registrars for “two good [white] people of the town to vouch for him,” to which the young man acerbically replied: “Nossir, I don’t know two good white people ... to vouch for me.”⁸⁸

Brown also observed the subtler ways in which African American oppression was prolonged. He centred his essay “Meekness in Bronze” around a statue of a black man erected by the City of Natchitoches “in recognition of the Arduous and Faithful Service of the Good Darkies of Louisiana.” The statue was erected in 1927 using a donation from Mr. Bryan, cotton planter and banker, who remembered a glorious childhood accompanied by spirituals and games with slave children on his father’s plantation. This gave him “the urge to do something big for the Negro.”⁸⁹ Here Brown could poke fun in a way that was outside the bounds of possibility within the Federal Writers’ Project *American Guides*. Brown talked to his friend about a piece of folklore included in the *Louisiana Guide* that “Plantation Negroes, inebriated after a spree in town, go to the statue to ask the way home and the Good Darky never fails to tell them the right direction.” “No such lie” his friend retorted sardonically.⁹⁰

Brown’s journey was fragmented and the book that was eventually published reflects this. However, Brown succeeded in tackling the omissions and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 109-12.

⁸⁹ “Negroes: Statue,” *Time Magazine*, 3 Jan 1927.

⁹⁰ Brown, Tidwell, and Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown’s A Negro Looks at the South*, 187.

misrepresentations of *A Southerner Discovers the South*. Thus the chapters written as straightforward travel reportage included aspects of black life that were left out of travel guides of the period: details of slave markets, discrimination against black southerners and their exclusion from many of the landmarks of the South because of segregation. Brown's visits to historic sites brought to the reader his direct experiences of Jim Crow and exposed an aspect of the South that Daniels could not document because it did not affect him as a white man and he failed to see it. Brown could not visit Joel Chandler Harris's home even though Harris's fortune was made on the basis of the stories he overheard on his uninvited visits to black people's homes. Brown experienced oppressive aspects of southern life that were invisible to Daniels: the racist tourist trinkets at Stone Mountain, the naked aggression of the southern whites who tried to drive the black visitors off the road, the tension in a small town after he and his friend had an unwanted encounter with a group of white girls. He documented the absurdities of Jim Crow restrictions and the lengths taken by whites to sustain stereotypes of docile blacks (for example, asking a statue of a 'good darkey' for directions home).

Brown championed and refined the approach that he and Benjamin Botkin first developed in the early 1930s and used within the Federal Writers' Project, a 'living lore' to record with accuracy a strong selection of diverse, intelligent and assertive African American protests about segregation, their treatment in the war effort, politics, the economy and exploitation. These selections directly contradicted Jonathan Daniels' belief that southern blacks were passive and looked to white southerners to protect and guide them in day-to-day affairs and to lead them gradually towards a more equal future.

'A Brave Light Against the Damp and Wind'

During the 1942 summer term at Atlanta University, Brown made plans to visit author Lillian Smith in her mountain home at Clayton, Georgia and to talk to her about his new book. Smith was one of a handful of white southerners who challenged segregation. Smith ran a successful summer

camp called Laurel Falls for the daughters of middle-class southern white families. Financially independent, she spoke out through a series of literary journals that she established with her partner Paula Snelling, beginning with *Pseudopodia* in 1936.

Smith and Snelling shared similar attitudes about race relations and the South with Brown. They criticised the southern Agrarians, for example, in a 1936 review of "Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence," by Allen Tate and Herbert Agar. This echoed Brown's 1931 critical review of the Agrarians' earlier manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. Brown had ridiculed the arrogance of the Agrarians in promoting the jaded solution of a separate black community "'under his own vine and fig tree' (which is a cultured euphemism for ghetto)."⁹¹ The Autumn 1936 issue of *Pseudopodia* included a harsh reflection on the "sugary sentimentality" of *Gone With the Wind*.⁹² Again, Brown shared the perspective. In *The Negro in American Fiction*, which Brown was to publish the following year, he noted that its author Margaret Mitchell accepted the traditional imagery of the fortunate and contented slave and depicted those who left the plantation as the "least energetic, trustworthy and intelligent and the most vicious and brutal." He deplored the sentimentalized master/ slave relationship and the focus on aristocrats and house slaves, as if small farmers and their slave field hands had never existed.⁹³

In 1937, Paula Snelling and Lillian Smith renamed their little magazine *The North Georgia Review* and in 1942, it became *The South Today*. Their central concern was the southern racial hierarchy but they also promoted discussion on other social issues, including religion and the role of women. As well as publishing their own views, they gathered articles by those interested in changing southern race relations: Wilbur J. Cash, author of *The Mind of the*

⁹¹ D. A. John, "Criticism Agrarians," *Pseudopodia* 1 (1936): 14; Sterling A. Brown, "The Literary Scene - Chronicle and Comment: A Romantic Defense," *Opportunity* 9, 4 (1931): 118.

⁹² Lillian Smith, "One More Sigh for the Good Old South: Review of *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell," in *From the Mountain: Selections from Pseudopodia, the North Georgia Review, and South Today*, ed. Helen and Redding S. Sugg Jr. White (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1972), 30.

⁹³ Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, 194-95; Hollis Woods, "Professor Attacks 'Gone with the Wind' G.W.T.W. Novel Is Attacked by Howard Prof.," *Chicago Defender*, 2 Mar 1940, 9. After the release of the film, Brown would speak out again against its stereotypes in a powerful lecture at Northwestern University, which featured in an article in the *Chicago Defender*.

South (1941), white sociologist Arthur Raper and black sociologist Ira Reid, and African American leaders James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois. They reviewed books about the South, including those by African American authors. Smith was one of only a few southern whites who wholeheartedly committed to integration in these years and her belief that segregation damaged all southerners, black and white, informed her choices for inclusion in the journal. On a personal level, she frequently corresponded with African Americans using the same direct and thoughtful style that she did with white acquaintances and she was encouraging and supportive of the efforts of writers like Pauli Murray to have their work published. This was in sharp contrast to Daniels whose correspondence shows little contact with African Americans.

Smith and Snelling wrote to Sterling Brown in June 1939 about a series of sketches about “southerners who are making a distinctive contribution to the enrichment of southern and national life” that they planned for *The North Georgia Review*:

We think at once of you; because of your personality, your magnificent work and the influence which you are exerting; because of your courage and ability to cleave through muddled issues to the core, because of your consistent emphasis on human values.⁹⁴

Only a few letters between Sterling Brown and Lillian Smith survive and these are from the years 1939 and 1945. It is unclear how much correspondence passed between them. Brown was an unreliable correspondent and a fire at Smith’s home in 1955 destroyed some of her letters.⁹⁵ However, it is clear that Brown and Smith became friends and she visited Brown and his wife Daisy at home in Washington, D.C. in 1942 before he began collecting material in earnest for *A Negro Looks at the South*.⁹⁶

He wrote to her on 25th July 1942 expressing his envy of two earlier trips made by his friends at Atlanta University, Ira De A. Reid and Margaret

⁹⁴ Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling to Sterling A. Brown, 25 Jun 1939, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

⁹⁵ Margaret Rose Gladney, *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xv.

⁹⁶ Sterling A. Brown to Lillian Smith, 27 Aug 1942, Lillian Smith Papers.

Wormley from the University's Sociology and English Departments respectively. His schedule at the Atlanta Summer School and the interviews he had arranged for the book had prevented him from making the trip with them. He realised that now that the summer camp Smith ran had started, it would be more difficult for him to visit. Brown faced other barriers to the trip. He had no car and no one else could transport him as gas and tyres were now rationed for the war effort. He reported that he had been gathering a lot of material for the book and had "a great deal" that he wanted to talk to her about in relation to the "teeming" Southern scene: "I must talk some of this out with people who understand."⁹⁷

A few days later, Smith wrote to tell Edwin Embree at the Rosenwald Fund that she and Snelling were keen to invite Brown to tea with the campers and staff:

I feel that the time is coming for definite and decent action as well as talk. While it may have been good strategy in the past to play safe, I am beginning to feel that a few decent southerners must break the spell which binds us all down here, by acting decently as well as talking decently.⁹⁸

They had hosted interracial gatherings since 1936 but the notion of introducing Brown to the middle-class girls at the camp and to the camp staff was a more audacious step in acting against segregation in the South. The consequences of their outspokenness and their actions were also becoming evident. Smith wrote to Walter White in June about the difficulties they had with their printer for the *North Georgia Review* who had refused to publish their latest issue as he "felt that it would stir up racial trouble in the South."⁹⁹

Once term ended at Atlanta University, Brown put his travelling plans into action. He made arrangements to visit white sociologist Arthur Raper in Greensboro.¹⁰⁰ At the end of August, he wrote again to Smith. He was headed

⁹⁷ Sterling A. Brown to Lillian Smith, 25 Jul 1942, Lillian Smith Papers.

⁹⁸ Lillian Smith to Edwin R. Embree, 28 July 1942 in Gladney, *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith*, 60.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Arthur Franklin Raper Papers 1913-1979, 03066, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Arthur Franklin Raper Papers 1913-1979 03066, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. No correspondence could be traced between

to Fort Benning, Tuskegee and Birmingham. He hoped to visit her home on the Old Screamer mountain in Clayton on 3rd September and travel out on the Southern train back to Washington, D.C. the next day. His visit took place in mid September 1943. It was an important meeting for Brown as the very personal letter he wrote to Smith on his departure demonstrates:

There was a light on old Screamer this morning at five thirty. It was a brave light against the damp and wind, the darkness and the cold. Thank you for everything you've done for me. Maybe in time to come you'll understand just how far I am in your debt. There are words I picked up this summer: "You all are something else again!" Thank you for the richness of your friendship and your courage. Came here low cotton. Going out like a man of war. Sterling.¹⁰¹

The following February, he wrote to Smith and Snelling again and emphasized that he would always cherish the visit. He hoped to send them an article for *South Today* but he was nervous about doing the material justice. "This is a big job and I don't want to fail it; I believe I have something to say if I can only get it well said."¹⁰² In April 1943, Smith visited the Browns in Washington, D.C. and, shortly afterwards, he sent them a sketch for the magazine, "Romance on a Bus," which with his permission Paula Snelling renamed "Words on a Bus." Smith also asked Brown if he would read and comment on the manuscript of her forthcoming novel *Strange Fruit*.¹⁰³

Smith and Snelling continued to struggle with the repercussions against their increasingly outspoken support for racial equality. Early 1943 brought difficulties in getting a licence from the Post Office at Clayton to send the magazine through the mail and a threatened investigation of Smith and Snelling for subversion by the Governor of Georgia. Nevertheless, the magazine grew in popularity. In 1945, when they ceased publication, its circulation had increased to ten thousand.¹⁰⁴ Smith's controversial novel *Strange Fruit* was published in 1944. In June 1945, she wrote to Brown to

Arthur Raper and Sterling Brown, although a tape recording of Brown reading poetry at a gathering at Raper's home in 1941/1942 does exist at the Wilson Library. Sterling A. Brown, T-3966/1: *Audiotapes: "Sterling Brown's Cotton," & "Slim Jim," and Others, 1941-1942.*

¹⁰¹ Sterling A. Brown to Lillian Smith, 17 Sep 1942, Lillian Smith Papers.

¹⁰² Sterling A. Brown to Lillian Smith, 8 Feb 1943, Lillian Smith Papers.

¹⁰³ Lillian Smith to Sterling A. Brown, 29 Apr 1943, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

¹⁰⁴ Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 227.

thank him for his letter of praise about the book which “said so many things that other people had failed to say. You saw so many things in the book that few people saw – things I wanted so terribly for them to see.”¹⁰⁵

Through reading Smith and Snelling’s little journal, Brown knew that he wanted to meet these exceptional southern women. Most southern white liberals were unable to discuss civil rights dispassionately because of their fear of change and fixation on social separation. Smith and Snelling challenged segregation and communicated with black Americans as equals. They were optimistic that the South could adapt and change. They (and Arthur Raper) were the only white southerners with whom Brown could communicate on his southern journey.

‘Putting on the Brakes’

Both Jennifer Ritterhouse and Daniels’ biographer Charles Eagles argue that, primarily because of the criticism he received from friends after the Ericson debacle in 1936, Daniels began to question his racial views and became increasingly liberal. Historian Glenda Gilmore provides as an example Daniels’ supportive attitude to African American Pauli Murray’s application for admission to the graduate school at the University of North Carolina in 1939.¹⁰⁶ However, Daniels’ correspondence in the years immediately after 1936 gives no indication of an increasing liberalization, nor does it provide any concrete evidence of a progressive change in his racial attitudes. He seemed unable to formulate a new way forward for the South and was reliant on a concept of a benevolent paternalism towards poor whites and blacks. He considered that the leverage for change must be through economic improvements for both races, yet would not accept that a system in which all services must be doubly provided, one set for whites and another for blacks, could never be economically viable even if it could be administered fairly. When Sosna opined that southern liberals sometimes employed “Northern

¹⁰⁵ Lillian Smith to Sterling A. Brown, 15 Jun 1945, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

¹⁰⁶ Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 298.

‘hypocrisy’ to excuse Southern recalcitrance,” he might as well have written specifically about Daniels.¹⁰⁷ Daniels reiterated over and over the disparity in funding between the North and the South. Simplistically, he believed that if only the South could be allocated its fair share of the nation’s wealth, there would be sufficient funds to enforce the ‘separate but equal’ principle. He saw separation of the races as indispensable for reasons that he could never define clearly but could only have stemmed from a sense of racial superiority and a fear of miscegenation. Daniels’ views on race relations changed slowly. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that he would support the introduction and enforcement of new civil rights laws through his editorials in the *News and Observer*.¹⁰⁸

Brown had a track record as a critic who was painfully frank in his pronouncements on fiction and non-fiction alike when he reviewed *A Southerner Discovers the South* in 1938. There is no reason therefore to doubt his integrity when he claimed to see much that was positive in Daniels’ account of the South. Whilst today’s reader may wince at Daniels’ paternalism, Brown did not criticise this, at least not in print. On the contrary, he praised Daniels for demonstrating that the South was not as ‘solid’ as it was described and that changes were afoot in politics, industry and race relations. He applauded Daniels’ inclusion of subjects previously hidden such as Virginia’s role in breeding slaves for the lucrative internal market to the Deep South. Many historians and journalists parodied black participation in Reconstruction, but Daniels did not, and he denounced the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan.

Daniels’ book, however, was far from the “candid photography” suggested by Brown. It contained evasions and omissions that spoke as loudly as the stories included. Brown praised Daniels for his acknowledgement that black southerners had only been set free “in a manner of speaking” and for his exposure of “contemporary injustice and exploitation.” Daniels omitted a great deal of contemporary evidence of injustice and he put forward no

¹⁰⁷ Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 200.

¹⁰⁸ Eagles, *Jonathan Daniels and Race Relations*, 154-231.

solutions beyond vague notions of social “planning.” He was constrained by a rigid paternalistic mindset about the limited potential of black Americans and the superiority of whites. His sympathy for black southerners was in relation to poverty and oppression generally and his responsibility as a white man of the educated classes to ameliorate this, whether those suffering were black or white. Paralysed by the possibility that the segregated social order of the South would be overturned, he and other southern white liberals could not fathom an alternative way of life within the South, hence his account was peppered with examples of blacks and whites who idealised the paternalism of the past. As a southern black interviewed by Brown commented: “Some of these Southern liberals used to want to accelerate Negro progress. Now it seems that all they want to do is put on the brakes.”¹⁰⁹

In 1938, Brown and others saw Daniels’ analysis as an improvement on most of the writing about the South that reached a wide audience. For example, in history, Ulrich B. Phillips was still the renowned authority on slavery. His argument, that slavery was a benevolent institution that educated barbaric and child-like Africans in civilised ways, held strong until the 1950s.¹¹⁰ Within the FWP and the Carnegie Myrdal Study, Brown had shared a vision with white intellectuals, even if it was at times tense and contested. It appears that Brown and his contemporaries such as Walter White felt that progress could not be made unless they did what they could to build an alliance with southern white liberals for policy change. White made much of the positive aspects of Daniels’ book and his editorial opinions. Benjamin Brawley asserted that Daniels had “become known within recent years as one of the most forward-looking spirits of the South.”¹¹¹ Even Wilhelmina Roberts, who had criticised Daniels’ book so bitterly, wanted Daniels to know that she could see something positive in his efforts. She wrote again to Daniels on Christmas Day, 1938:

I too, am sorry if I caused you to think that I considered your book unfriendly to my race. Not that. All of what you wrote was quite true,

¹⁰⁹ Brown, Tidwell, and Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South*, 27.

¹¹⁰ John David Smith, *Slavery, Race and American History : Historical Conflict, Trends and Method 1866-1953* (Armonk (N.Y.): M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 44-46.

¹¹¹ Benjamin Brawley, "A Southerner's Travels at Home," *The Journal of Negro Education* 7, 4 (1938): 553.

and not unfriendly, but I simply long to see the few achievements of the Negro put into print beside the things he still has to suffer.¹¹²

However, just a few years later black intellectuals would lose patience with southern liberals ‘putting on the brakes’ and would state their claim to equality more forcefully.

What the Negro Wants

When William T. Couch of the University of North Carolina Press commissioned a volume of essays by African Americans of various political perspectives, he was shocked by their responses. His idea in putting the collection together was that

the country, and particularly the South, ought to know what the Negro wants, and that statements from leading Negroes might throw some light on this important question.¹¹³

Howard historian Rayford W. Logan, a close friend of Sterling Brown, edited the book. It included contributions from educator Mary McLeod Bethune, elder statesman W. E. B. Du Bois, the writer Langston Hughes, labour activist and journalist A. Phillip Randolph, historian Charles H. Wesley and Sterling Brown. To Couch’s discomfort, the authors unanimously agreed that what African Americans wanted was total equality and an end to segregation.

Couch, who had rebuked Daniels for his retrograde attitude to Ericson’s dining with Ford, now demonstrated his retreat to a position equally as conservative. He wrote an impassioned “Publisher’s Introduction,” in which he outlined his opposition to total equality for black Americans. He put forward three prevalent theories about the black man’s position in America. The first was that his “condition has been produced by his inferiority.” The second concurred with the first, but argued “this inferiority can be overcome” with the help of the white man, but with the main burden upon the black race. The third theory (and here he pointed to Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* –

¹¹² Wilhelmina Roberts to Jonathan W. Daniels, 25 Dec 1938.

¹¹³ W. T. Couch, “Publisher’s Introduction,” in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), ix.

see chapter four) was that the “Negro’s condition” was solely “a product of race prejudice, and the consequent disabilities inflicted on the Negro by the white man.” Couch unleashed a furious diatribe against social scientists such as Gunnar Myrdal and those involved in *An American Dilemma* for their relativist view of culture and what he defined as their denial of universal values. Couch claimed that because they argued that no specific culture was superior to another, they could not therefore make a negative judgement on the culture of the American South and attempt to change it to bring about racial equality.¹¹⁴

Couch was furious at black Americans whom he claimed were more interested in the label of equality than in making efforts to improve themselves. He had hoped that his contributors would produce “more evidence that the white man is not considered responsible for everything, that the Negro himself has some responsibility...” Expecting a range of views and proposals including ideas for gradual improvements to agriculture, industry, and education, Couch was faced instead with a group of intellectuals uncompromisingly demanding an end to segregation and all he could do was mourn the loss of Booker T. Washington’s “great leadership.”¹¹⁵

Logan’s response was that African Americans were “disturbed by the continued denial of what they consider to be their legitimate aspirations” and that white Americans were alarmed “at what they call the excessive insistence by Negroes upon a too rapid change in the *status quo*.” He argued that black Americans across the political spectrum wanted the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as all other Americans and that

Americans who prefer to believe in democracy will have to face the dilemma of cooperating in the implementation of these aspirations or of limiting their ideals to white Americans only.¹¹⁶

As Holloway concludes, Logan had been appointed to select “the literary artists who would perform for a white reading audience and the audience

¹¹⁴ Ibid., x-xviii.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., xxi, xxii-xxiii.

¹¹⁶ Rayford W. Logan, “Editor’s Preface,” *ibid.*, viii.

declared he had picked the wrong players.” The black and white participants in the project agreed on its objectives but their very different “racially-determined vantage points” meant that they were bound to see “unique if not opposing realities.”¹¹⁷

Brown’s “Count Us In” was the concluding essay in the collection, a rallying cry for equality on all fronts. Pivoting his arguments on black American involvement in the war, Brown catalogued the progress made by blacks in the war effort and the impediments they encountered, some trivial, some “rank injustices.” Overall, what he found

among Southern Negroes – civilians and military men, upper and lower class, conservatives and radicals – was a sense of not belonging, and protest, sometimes not loud but always deeply felt.

Everywhere he went in the South, Brown heard talk of freedom and democracy: in newspaper articles, church sermons and on the radio. He repeatedly “heard the anecdote, which spread like a folk tale, of the new sort of hero – the Negro soldier,” who fought for democracy overseas and would not retreat in the face of racial prejudice at home. Southern demagogic politicians reacted violently to any sign of the black American getting “out of his place,” but southern intellectuals were also averse to change and were mostly “defeatists.” Each white interest group vouched that they wished only to protect blacks from the strife and “perhaps tragedy” that would unfold if they agitated for the abolition of segregation. Brown noted how determined southerners were to prevent social equality and a mulatto population, and how they ignored the fact that the ‘Negro population’ was already a mixture of “Negro, Indian and Caucasian.”¹¹⁸

Brown wondered if the “smokescreen of intermarriage” was not put in place so that southerners could avoid conceding rights to economic, political and social equality that would pose a danger to them, for they would lose their

¹¹⁷ Jonathan Scott Holloway, “The Black Intellectual and the “Crisis Canon” in the Twentieth Century,” *The Black Scholar* 31, 1 (2001): 8.

¹¹⁸ Sterling A. Brown, “Count Us In,” in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 305-27.

privilege and the benefits that came from exploitation of the black population.
For:

what segregationists denounce as ‘wanting to be with white folks,’ Negroes think of as participating in the duties and enjoying the privileges of democracy. This means being with white folks, undoubtedly, since whites have nearly monopolized these duties and privileges.

Black southerners were no longer willing to sit back and wait for white southerners to concede some privileges to them, and they did not need to be protected from conflict. They expected “that some of them are going to get hurt before they get what they want.” They could see that the road ahead would be long and difficult but they wanted to be on the journey, not “mere passengers” but “to do some of the map-reading and some of the driving.” The segregated system of the South had been promoted as a system arrived at through mutual agreement, but the mutual agreement was the kind whereby: “You know: a man puts his gun in your ribs and you put your pocketbook in his hands.” Ultimately, segregation was “the denial of belonging” and black Americans wanted “to belong, to help achieve and preserve democracy,” and to be “counted in.”¹¹⁹

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined Daniels’ and Brown’s efforts to document the South and demonstrated that, despite sharing a common interest in improving the condition of all southerners, they could find little common ground in relation to the region’s treatment of its black citizens. Although Brown praised Daniels’ attempt to assess the South’s situation in 1938, his support for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare hinted that there were ideological differences at play.

A Negro Looks at the South was not published for decades. This was a significant loss, as a timely response to Daniels’ successful book would

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 329-44.

undoubtedly have achieved a national readership. Essays from *A Negro Looks at the South* did appear, however, in *Survey Graphic*, *The South Today*, *The Record Changer*, *Phylon* and in *What the Negro Wants*.¹²⁰ Within them, Brown captured the many opinions of black southerners as they debated social, economic and political issues. He demonstrated that far from being too poor and ignorant to warrant inclusion in a democratic South, they had informed views on matters pertaining to their own rights and responsibilities, to the region and to the nation.

Brown used the innovative methodologies he had developed within folklore and the FWP to bear witness to a very different South. Where Daniels saw only paternalism, grateful subservience, and a race without the capacity to participate in business or democracy, Brown recorded debate and protest and political opinions from black southerners of different classes about their exclusion from southern life. Brown's pioneering approach would be popularised in books like Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* (1970).¹²¹ An obituary describing Terkel's accomplishments could easily have been applied to Brown's innovations decades earlier:

People call Terkel's business "oral history", but it is more like the weaving of a fabulous verbal tapestry, the threads of which are human preoccupations. It is the rich art of taking the vernacular, and making it eternal. Such a process does not merely record the details that keep people's minds busy, it gives them value.¹²²

Brown understood that race, class and economics were bound together to weave a structure that benefitted the white majority, that the white majority would not willingly give up those benefits, and that only black protest would unravel the structure of privilege. In this he allied himself, not with white liberals, but with black southerners such as labour organiser Clinton Clark

¹²⁰ Brown, "Out of Their Mouths," *Survey Graphic* 16 (1942): 480-83; "Words on a Bus," *South Today* 7 (1943): 26-28; "Farewell to Basin Street," *The Record Changer* 3 (1944): 7-9, 51; "Count Us In.," "Georgia Nymphs," *Phylon* 6 (1945): 362-67; "Georgia Sketches," *Phylon* 6 (1945): 225-31; "The Muted South," *Phylon* 6 (1945): 22-34; "And/Or," *Phylon* 7 (1946): 269-72.

¹²¹ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York Pantheon, 1970).

¹²² Ed Vulliamy, "Studs Terkel (Obituary)," *The Guardian*, 1 Nov 2008.

who had been “beaten, arrested, jailed and threatened with the rope time and time again” for union organising. On his release from jail in Natchitoches, he was warned to stay out of the parish. Instead Clark promised to return with “a stronger organization behind me the next time.”¹²³ Brown saw that African Americans’ faith in white liberals was fast disappearing and that they were willing to take matters into their own hands.¹²⁴ He understood, in a way that southern white liberals on the whole could not, that black Americans would now do ‘some of the driving’ and play an active part in shaping the future of their country.

¹²³ Brown, "Count Us In," 333.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

The central theme of black American history has been the constant struggle to overcome the barriers of race and the reality of unequal racial identities between black and white. This racial bifurcation has created parallel identities or racial universes, in which blacks and whites may interact closely with one another but perceive social reality in dramatically different ways.
(Manning Marable, 1995).¹

Historian Manning Marable notes the different perspectives within black America on how best to achieve the empowerment of black people, which historians have commonly categorized and contrasted as integrationist and separatist. Marable emphasises the overlap between them, and adds a new strategy that he calls “transformationist.” Transformationists aim to destroy the ideological, social and institutional power of race and restructure power relations between groups and classes. To do so they must redefine culture, “not as a set of artefacts or formal rituals, but as the human content and product of history itself.” Marable calls on scholars and activists to create the conditions for a vital black cultural identity, while eradicating the language of inferiority and racial inequality.²

This thesis examined the strange career of a pioneer ‘transformationist,’ Sterling Brown, concentrating on his decision to move away from creative writing and into a series of new projects related to folklore, black history, sociology and travel reportage in the 1930s and 1940s. I set out to understand the reasons for Brown’s disappearance from the public record from the 1950s and questioned why cultural historians who ‘rediscovered’ Brown later in the century focused almost entirely on his poetry and literary criticism.³ They rightly praised Brown’s ability to incorporate, adapt and give prominence to the rich language, imagery and music of poor black Americans and their resilience in the face of poverty and oppression.⁴ However, they generally

¹ Manning Marable, "History and Black Consciousness: The Political Culture of Black America," in *Beyond Black and White : Transforming African-American Politics*, ed. Manning Marable (New York: Verso, 2009), 227.

² Ibid.

³ Stephen E. Henderson, "A Strong Man Called Sterling Brown," *Black World* 19 (1970): 5-12; Henry Louis Gates, "Songs of a Racial Self: On Sterling A. Brown " in *Figures in Black : Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴ John S. Wright, "Sterling Brown's Folk Odyssey," *Black American Literature Forum* 23, 1 (1989); Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown : Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*.

ignored his decision to move away from creative writing and into other fields just at the moment when he became successful. Where scholars did consider his involvement in the world of the social sciences, in the main they glossed over the challenges he faced in operating in this new arena.

This neglect is unfortunate because the projects that consumed Brown's time and energy from the 1930s demonstrate another phase in his efforts to record black Americans' "sense of identity, social cohesion and integrity, in the face of policies which have been designed to deny both their common humanity and particularity." Brown's ideas about folklore, his efforts as a national editor within the Federal Writers' Project, his struggles to deliver an analysis of 'The Negro in American Culture' for the Carnegie Study of the Negro in America, and his journalistic writing about the South uncover challenges not only for Brown himself but for other black intellectuals who were attempting to transform America and create a more equal society. Their experiences in interacting with white intellectuals during the 1930s and 1940s exemplify the struggle to overcome the barriers of race described by Marable, in which blacks and whites interact but inhabit "parallel identities or racial universes" and experience very different versions of social reality.⁵

Black Activism and Reaching a Wider Audience

Through my research on the formative influences upon Brown's life and work, I establish that his upbringing and education encouraged his participation in a 'continuing tradition' of activism for black civil rights. I demonstrate that a strong connection with poor black southerners was instilled in him from a young age through his family's attitude to duty, community and race rather than gained through a romantic odyssey to the South in the 1920s as had been posited by literary historians.⁶ However, Brown's genuine pleasure and pride

⁵ Marable, "History and Black Consciousness: The Political Culture of Black America," 227.

⁶ This romantic version of Brown's immersion in the South was a myth that he started himself as early as the 1930s. See, for example, his letter to his wife Daisy from Atlanta in the mid 1930s: "I wanted to rush back to you - that was tearing me - and yet I knew the frustration - the feeling that I can't write, that I have nothing left to say - the fear all these things that make me irritable and jumpy and restless..... And so I went on the Odyssey - staying

in the aesthetic creations of the black folk was fused with a sense of his responsibilities as a 'race man.' He was very different from his contemporary J. Saunders Redding whom Lawrence P. Jackson describes as being resentful of the burden of being a 'race representative' and experiencing "immobilizing feelings of guilt towards his ethnic inheritance, self-loathing, distorted patriotism, and rage.⁷

Although Brown established some relationships across the colour line, his strongest alliances were with black contemporaries in the social sciences including Ralph Bunche, Allison Davis, Abram Harris, Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier. Although Brown is mentioned as a radical associate of Harris and Frazier at Howard, his own objectives have not been examined alongside theirs as his writing was seen in the context of literature and theirs was analysed in the context of the social sciences.⁸ However, they did share a number of strategic objectives, which gave Brown further motivation for moving away from creative writing and into social research. They believed that in order to improve the status of black Americans, the focus must move away from race and toward a consideration of the social, political and economic factors holding black Americans back. They also challenged the stereotypes that maintained the fallacy that black Americans were essentially different from other Americans, and the tendency of African Americans to be treated as a homogenous group, when in fact it included many different strata and groupings. In this period, Brown and his black allies were attempting to influence the building and dissemination of knowledge about African Americans within a challenging context. They wanted to transform public understanding of the 'race problem' and to reach as wide an audience as possible. They were largely prevented from gaining access to a wide audience by the prejudice and segregation of the era and their desire to surmount those barriers helps to explain why Sterling Brown made this strange career choice.

longer than I intended - and longer than I should." Sterling A. Brown to Daisy Turnbull Brown, 22 Aug 1935, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

⁷ Jackson, *The Indignant Generation : A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*, 2.

⁸ Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*.

Brown was not particularly unusual within this generation of black intellectuals, in believing that in order to fulfil one's responsibility to the race, one was obliged to move beyond the confines of a particular academic area. Sterling Brown's father's acquaintances such as W. E. B. Du Bois moved between literature, sociology and politics. Brown's generation also felt able and obliged to cross professional or disciplinary boundaries. Charles S. Johnson was one of the chief promoters of the New Negro Renaissance but his professional training was in sociology, not in literature. Brown's childhood friend Allison Davis studied English at Harvard but subsequently became a professional anthropologist and educationalist. Roscoe Lewis, who worked with Brown on *The Negro in Virginia* taught chemistry but transferred to the Social Sciences Department at Hampton in 1943. Ralph Bunche was a political scientist, who pursued anthropology to add to his skills and understanding.

Furthermore, because of racial discrimination, highly educated and talented African Americans such as Charles S. Johnson, Sterling Brown, Allison Davis, Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, and Roscoe Lewis were confined to teaching in black institutions, some (Brown, Frazier, Lewis) for their entire working lives, most at least for the early part of their careers. They were activists as well as scholars, maximizing any opportunities they found to improve race relations and create opportunities for African Americans. Brown trained as a teacher, a poet and a critic. Because he immersed himself in the folklore, music, jokes and tall tales, literature and history of African Americans, he amassed an extensive knowledge. He gained a professional expertise similar to that of today's cultural historians, although that discipline was not named and institutionalised until later in the twentieth century. In this respect, he was different to most of his black intellectual allies in the social sciences who gave culture and cultural history less consideration.

Brown acknowledged W. E. B. Du Bois as his "intellectual father,"⁹ and his notion of 'the Negro as American' owes much to Du Bois's legacy.¹⁰ Historian

⁹ "The Black Intellectual and the "Crisis Canon" in the Twentieth Century," 4.

¹⁰ That is the 'Negro as participant,' as 'an integral part of American life.' See chapter 3.

Ross Posnock traces a pragmatist cosmopolitan tradition in American intellectual life through Du Bois, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison to James Baldwin. He sees the influence of William James on Du Bois and Locke in their repudiation of essentialism and ideas of authenticity and their aspirations towards a society that transcended race. As Posnock notes, African American literary history “often reflects and enforces the unexamined assumptions that racial authenticity is the standard of value and the black bourgeoisie its negation.” By this Posnock means “racial difference and the question of what and who is authentically black” predominates.¹¹ Like Du Bois, Brown cast off any notion of essentialism, that there was such a thing as “The Negro.” In a society that maligned African American culture, he set out to annihilate the crass stereotypes that abounded, whether they were present in popular fiction or intellectual, ‘scientific’ texts. At the same time, he expanded his efforts to demonstrate the value and contemporary relevance of ‘the racial particular’ - African American oral culture, whether it was expressed by the rural or the urban ‘folk.’ Its value was to the wider society and he amplified its capacity to articulate universal experiences and themes through its own idiom.

Brown was an ‘anti-race race man’ as defined by Posnock in that he resisted the notion that black intellectuals should or could speak for ‘the Negro.’ He opposed also the assertion that black intellectuals could be experts only on racial matters rather than, for example, science or the history of ancient Greece. He was clear, however, that his *own* ‘mission’ was to actively pursue change in race relations wherever possible. His background and training, formal and informal, meant that he felt qualified and duty-bound to move into new areas of investigation. He also believed that African Americans should have equal access to funding to gain expertise and build a body of knowledge and equal opportunity to disseminate knowledge to a national audience. Speaking to white folklorist Bill Ferris in 1979, he expressed this

¹¹ Ross Posnock, *Color & Culture : Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5-6, 3.

plainly: “I don’t believe in any racial monopoly on this thing but I think we [black scholars] ought to be in there too.”¹²

The Federal Writers’ Project, the Carnegie Myrdal Study and Brown’s travel writing about the South were each opportunities for Brown ‘to be in there too’ as a black intellectual and to gain a wide audience, whom he could educate about the cultural history and contemporary situation of African Americans. Brown had promoted black cultural strength through his poetry and literary criticism and demolished common misrepresentations of black Americans. Through both the FWP and the Carnegie Study of the Negro in America, he set out (as he had through his creative writing) to demonstrate that African Americans had a valuable and unique culture, but that it had also intersected and intertwined with that of many other ethnic Americans to make up a vibrant and dynamic national culture. Brown’s effort to write a commentary on the wartime South came from the same impulse. Through his response to white journalist Jonathan Daniels’ *A Southerner Discovers the South*, Brown had another opportunity to reveal more about black Americans, to encounter them as individuals rather than as ‘the Negro’ and to understand their experiences and pre-occupations as the South experienced dramatic changes. Daniels’ book was very successful and Brown’s hoped that his response could draw attention to the situation of black southerners on the national stage.

My main finding in relation to Brown’s strange career decisions in the 1930s was that his choices were not at all anomalous when one considers the evidence of his upbringing and the objectives he shared with black intellectuals in the period. Their common goal was to change the national dialogue about race and class and their ambition was to reach the widest possible audience to do so. Where Brown differed from his black intellectual allies was in his conviction that black culture as a dynamic force from the past to the present was as important as the ‘harder’ components of politics, class, social structures or economics.

¹² Sterling A. Brown, Interview with Bill Ferris, Yale University, 18 April 1979.

Interracial Alliances and the Representation of Black American Character And Identity

Brown's correspondence at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre at Howard University provides evidence of his contact with white critics, publishers, folklorists, anthropologists and sociologists. Within the thesis, I explored a small selection of his relationships across the colour line to understand how they affected his ideas and actions in the period. The purpose was to understand whether the constellations of mutual black and white influence that George Hutchinson and Michael Denning described in their studies of the Harlem Renaissance and the Popular Front respectively were productive in Brown's life.¹³ They argued that changes in the cultural landscape, for example, in education, labour, leisure time, publishing and music, created a cultural space in which new relationships between black and white Americans were possible. My thesis explored whether a shared interracial sensibility manifested itself as a lived reality in Brown's life, centred in a belief in social democracy, in workers' rights, and in a drive for black civil rights in America.

I found that contrary to the arguments put forward by historians such as Hutchinson, the relationships between black and white intellectuals in this period were severely restricted by the unequal balance of power between them and by their very different perceptions of social reality. By this I mean that most black and white intellectuals in this period had such different conceptions of the world that it hindered collaboration across the colour line. Brown built a positive and lasting intellectual alliance with folklorist Benjamin Botkin, but he was himself seen as an outsider who resisted the culture of white academia. He made a similar connection with Lillian Smith but again she was considered a radical for her views on class, culture and race. With the notable exceptions of Botkin and Smith, Brown's most productive alliances were with black academics operating in the social sciences. Chapters two to five of the thesis examined Brown's projects in the 1930s and early 1940s to ascertain how important alliances across the colour line were for

¹³ Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*; Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

Brown in this period and to what extent values and ideas were shared or contested within these interracial alliances.

In chapter three, I examined Brown's earliest contacts with Benjamin Botkin. They had a relationship across the colour line, professional and personal, that lasted many years, beginning when they were young poets interested in folklore. They found common ground in wanting to promote a living, evolving, vibrant 'folk-say.' In opposition to the majority of folklorists operating in this period, Botkin and Brown shared artistic and political objectives. They resisted the academic definition of folklore as artefacts from the past or ways of life that remained only in isolated areas. Instead they defined 'folk-say' as an adaptable organism that could spring up in a factory or a coal mine or any other industrial grouping as easily as in a rural valley disconnected from the modern world. They were interested in how folklore worked to hold communities and traditions together even as they evolved and developed new folklore. They were conscious that industrialisation, migration, contact with other ethnic groups, education and new opportunities were a threat to older traditions but they believed that both the people and their cultural practices could adapt and survive in changing conditions.¹⁴ Botkin's 'living lore' paid attention to the people (the 'folk') as well as the materials they produced (the 'lore') and encompassed a diverse range of Americans.

Botkin's interest in innovation and how folklore could be incorporated and developed within literature was the foundation of his alliance with Sterling Brown, who was experimenting with folklore, in form and content, and melding it with social realism within his poetry. They also shared an interest in folklore as a way of communicating about and therefore resisting oppression and injustice. Botkin and Brown were convinced that American people from different regions, races and occupations were creating valuable folk materials: songs, stories, jokes, and aphorisms. Not only were these as

¹⁴ Hirsch, "Folklore in the Making : B.A. Botkin," 3-38; Bruce Jackson, "Benjamin A. Botkin (1901-1975)," *ibid.* 88, 350 (1976): 1-6.

valuable as relics and artefacts, they also served as raw material that could form the ingredients of a new and vibrant American literature.

Brown and Botkin had links to the left-wing 'worker-writers' of the period, of whom the most well-known was probably Jack Conroy. Their interest was in the lives of the industrial working class and they wanted not only to gather their emerging folkways but also to publicise their work to a mass audience. Hence, there was not a strict delineation between folk culture and mass or popular culture for Botkin, Brown and their associates in this period. It was important however that the flavour and diversity of the culture of different groups of people was not lost. Through the Regionalism movement, Botkin and Brown hoped to capture the assortment of traditions, myths, stories and songs at large across the country and within that, Brown's special interest was in the South. They had a political goal in mind, believing that not only could Regionalism prevent the culture from developing into a bland homogeneity, it could also help the regions understand each others' customs and bring about greater co-operation and tolerance between groups of people on the national level. This was a more radical form of Regionalism that brought new social realities to the fore and that could destroy nostalgic pastoral myths of a 'glorious' past. Based on a shared interest in changing the self-image of American people and in giving a voice to a broader constituency that crossed race and class, Brown and Botkin developed a productive alliance.

Within the Federal Writers' Project, Brown's fight against racism continued. For the first time, a black intellectual had a federal mandate to challenge the way the southern states portrayed black people and the national editorial team supported him in his work. They embraced a similar vision to that developed by Brown and Botkin at the beginning of the decade. The 1930s had inspired the hope that an interracial coalition of intellectuals and activists could fight through the Popular Front to win people's hearts and minds. Through promoting a popular culture that included Americans of different races, they would persuade the American people to embrace an alternative understanding of who was an American and what that meant. Through images and stories of Americans, they would highlight a shared humanity and

a shared set of experiences. Through support for the poor and oppressed, they would portray common experiences that could unite them rather than divide them along racial lines.

Brown communicated with the State Directors about the content of the State Guides and had some success in ensuring more accurate reporting of the history and contemporary situation of southern blacks. He hoped that his own essay on the “The Negro in Washington” in the Washington, D. C. State Guide would serve as a model for other areas. He provided a full account of the city, recalling the history of slave trading in the capital and describing the living conditions of contemporary black residents. Their inclusion caused shock and controversy, as the unequal treatment of black Americans was invisible and ignored. When it was clear that they would have only limited influence on the portrayal of African Americans in the State Guides, the national team sponsored specific publications that would give a fuller picture of black history and black life. These included publications in Louisiana, Virginia, Florida, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia. Brown’s personal ambition for the Federal Writers’ Project is evident from his appeals to sponsors to support the list of unfinished publications in relation to African Americans at the Project’s close.

Brown fought with some success to keep the old stereotypes about blacks out of the Federal Writers’ Project publications but was not always able to overcome the racism and conservatism of the southern State Directors. Even when specific African American teams were in place, such as in Virginia, the editorial control was with a white State Director, Eudora Ramsay Richardson, and a battle ensued behind the scenes about the emphasis of the final published edition of *The Negro in Virginia*. Richardson was skeptical about Roscoe Lewis’s objectivity, keen to omit graphic accounts of ill-treatment unless challenged, and attempted to include stereotyped photographs of contented blacks in traditional farming and domestic roles.

Brown shared a vision with national FWP officials such as Henry Alsberg, who supported him in his efforts to portray an unbiased picture of African

American life in the state guides and in his attempts to ensure publication of specific materials about African Americans. Benjamin Botkin also joined the Federal Writers' Project in 1938 and they were able to make a qualitative difference to the nature of the ex-slave narratives collected by widening the topic lists and issuing guidance on how to gather the material. The narratives were life histories and as such were a new and innovative methodology that gathered history from the perspective of the slave rather than the master.

Brown's relationship with anthropologist Melville Herskovits demonstrates the problematic nature of African American's relationships with powerful white liberals. Herskovits was stubbornly convinced of the existence and importance of African retentions in black American culture and he could not understand the complexity of the issue for black intellectuals such as Brown. Brown believed in the existence of African survivals, albeit to a lesser extent than Herskovits, but he believed that the cultural development of African Americans during four centuries in America was more important. Emphasising African connections challenged Brown's central thesis, that black citizens were as American as any other citizen and were pivotal in the development of American culture. For Brown the notion of African survivals was also associated with the voyeuristic vogue for all things African that had emanated from the Harlem Renaissance 'fad' of the 1920s; its preoccupation with primitive, sexualised and 'free' behaviour, and the notion that African Americans were pleasure-driven and essentially animalistic, culturally different in essential ways from other Americans.¹⁵ *Drums and Shadows*, the specific study from the Georgia Writers' Project on which Brown and Herskovits disagreed, was filled with the sort of racial stereotypes that Brown had fought against in print for many years. Brown criticised "an essential injustice or lack of balanced observation in the book," but did not directly name his concern. Although Herskovits was considered a liberal, he was insensitive to the concerns of black intellectuals, and it appears that Brown felt unable to directly challenge such a powerful figure.

¹⁵ For these reasons, Brown was uninterested in the discourses of 'contributionism' or 'vindicationism' later mapped out by sociologists Orlando Patterson and St. Clair Drake in the 1970s and 1980s, which argued that "African peoples had once been something more than objects of pity and contempt - that they had been contributors to civilization 'from the earliest period of the history of nations.'" Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* 228.

Funding for the Federal Arts' Projects had been contentious from the outset and its support for artists and writers, many of whom were associated with the Left, left it open to charges of anti-Americanism and pro-Communism. Its publications ranged from highly conservative to radical by the standards of the day, particularly in terms of race and workers' rights. As the Second World War became the major issue of American politics, support for the Federal Writers' Project dwindled. Brown shared strong values about a heterogeneous American culture with national officials but the national team was dissolved when control of the projects was handed down to state level and the alliance ended there. Nevertheless, Brown had shared a vision across the colour line in this period of his life. From the early 1930s through the Popular Front period, he shared a set of ideas about a more inclusive American society and culture with folklorist Benjamin Botkin and with Henry Alsberg at the Federal Writers' Project. Their partnerships brought innovation – they brought a perspective to the study of African American folklore, history and culture that was decades ahead of its time. This was particularly in relation to their insistence that culture was living and evolving and not at risk of imminent obliteration by modernity. It was also in their methodology, as they promoted the idea of 'living lore' and the study of culture and history from 'the bottom up' which would not be embraced until the 1970s.

Brown was selected to participate in the Carnegie Corporation's Study of the American Negro. Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal recruited leading intellectuals to investigate the situation of African Americans, which included strong representation of black social scientists. Brown was isolated within the Carnegie Team, the sole poet and literary critic amongst professional sociologists, political scientists, economists and anthropologists. The study culminated in a declaration that America's subjugation of its black citizens was in direct opposition to the national democratic ideals. To evidence the point, Myrdal's team garnered facts about social institutions, the law, politics, and economics. They demonstrated that blacks were treated unfairly in every walk of life to the advantage of white Americans, and that white Americans perpetuated the system because it was to their material advantage.

Although Myrdal knew little about African American culture prior to the study, I demonstrate through his correspondence and actions, and contrary to the cursory dismissals of historians such as Walter Jackson, that Myrdal had a genuine interest in what Brown had to say and persevered in his efforts to get Brown to deliver his analysis of 'The Negro in American culture' long after his deadlines had passed. Some of Brown's earlier writing supported Myrdal's argument, for example, his critique of the stereotyping of black Americans in literature; and indeed Myrdal did refer directly albeit briefly to his previous writing on the matter within *An American Dilemma*.¹⁶ Brown's aim within the project was to comprehensively set out the ways in which African Americans had developed a dynamic culture and how black audiences responded: in humour and speech, art, music, theatre, dance, sport and participation in films and radio. He wanted to show the strengths of African America culture and its protective elements in the face of oppression and equally, its influence upon the wider American culture.

Although Myrdal was interested in incorporating an analysis of African American culture, he failed to provide the resources and the support that were required if Brown were to deliver his memoranda. Without these and faced with a project with an impossibly broad scope, Brown was bound to fail. When he could not provide a timely and serviceable analysis, Myrdal and the Project Team assigned the blame to him, and failed to recognize that they had any responsibility for the problem. From what Brown did submit to the study and his previous writing, it is evident that he wished to establish the extent of African American achievements, despite a suffocating lack of opportunity and outright exploitation. As historian Daryl Michael Scott has demonstrated, stereotypes about the pathological nature of African American culture, the emphasis on family dysfunction and breakdown, the criticism of black males for failing to provide stable family structures, and the emphasis on damaged psyches did not begin with Myrdal, who in fact did not espouse these views. Later liberals nurtured ideas about personality damage in an attempt to show the negative effects of segregation. Conservatives followed suit, eager to halt

¹⁶ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 1196.

preferential programmes for African Americans and reduce welfare expenditure. However, the language of *An American Dilemma*, its omission of black cultural strengths and its emphasis on the language of “pathology” was highly influential and portrayed the African American situation as completely the creation of white policy and practice. If Brown could have influenced Myrdal to write a strong narrative that showed that despite the social, legal, political, and economic discrimination against African Americans and a destructive national culture that demonised them as ‘other,’ they created a resilient cultural shield through their music, literature and folklore, it would have served as a powerful antidote to the ‘damage ideology’ that intensified as the twentieth century progressed. Despite the fact that Brown and Myrdal developed a strong rapport and apparently respected each other’s ideas, ultimately Myrdal did not invest enough in their interracial alliance. He did not provide the support and resources required to affirm the strengths of African Americans and integrate these into his text alongside the evidence of the harm done to them by the prejudices of white America.

Although Myrdal and the Carnegie Corporation continued to badger Brown for his delayed submission, he turned instead to a project that married his greatest interests: the South, what he and Botkin had called ‘living lore,’ and the freedom of writing more creatively even though it was still in the field of social research. This was Brown’s response to Jonathan Daniels’ *A Southerner Discovers the South*. Brown wrote about African American attitudes to the Second World War, about segregation on transport and in public facilities, about the struggle for equality in employment, education and agriculture, and about music. He had very little contact across the colour line on his trips across the South. Whatever limited common ground northern black intellectuals like Brown had shared with southern liberals in relation to advocating against lynching, in favour of improved education and equal treatment under the law, had eroded by the time Brown travelled the South collecting the testimony of black southerners on issues affecting their lives. Southern liberals like Jonathan Daniels undoubtedly had progressive views on such issues but their concern about outside interference attempting to dismantle segregation made them increasingly cautious on all racial issues by

the late 1930s. Brown did make a strong alliance with the white writer Lillian Smith. She, like Botkin, shared a set of values and objectives with Brown. In *A Negro Looks at the South*, Brown utilised the methodologies that he and Botkin had explored in the early 1930s and embedded in their work on the FWP to enable the folk to speak for themselves. He captured their views on current affairs and their contemplations on their own position in American society and demonstrated their humanity and intelligence, in a way that was seldom seen in publications of the period. However, Brown seemed to lack confidence in his innovative approach, he struggled to find a coherent narrative thread that could hold his observations together, and the book was not published in his lifetime.

Brown took an unequivocal stance against any forms of romanticized racialism including the folk pastoral, even when they were expressed by black contemporaries such as Zora Neale Hurston. He can be seen as part of an activist generation of African American artists - Jackson's 'indignant generation' or Morgan's social realism movement - who strove to maintain radical cultural work as the context became more challenging after the second world war. Brown, like other social realist artists and writers described by Morgan and Denning, rooted his studies within the political and economic context of the lives of those whom he wrote about and focused on themes such as working-class labour, migration, legal injustice and racial violence, the black soldier and anti-fascism. However, John S. Wright's remarks in relation to Brown on the blues can be extended into his attempts to widen the scope and focus of folklore, history and social research in that in each medium, he treated "the products of folk imagination as *self-conscious* wisdom," as the efforts of black Americans to contemplate their own humanity and the complexity of their situation in American society.¹⁷

Brown's Fall from Public View

Brown's most successful endeavour during the years he was involved in projects in the social sciences was in literature. *The Negro Caravan* was

¹⁷ Wright, "The New Negro Poet and the Nachal Man: Sterling Brown's Folk Odyssey," 163.

published in 1941 and marked the last significant publication of Brown's work until he was gradually 'rediscovered' by individuals within the Black Arts Movement. Contemporary critics from the fields of education, history and sociology agreed that "*The Negro Caravan* is literally epoch-making in several respects";¹⁸ "a remarkable mosaic of the thought, experience, and character of the Negro in relation to the American scene";¹⁹ "the total effect is stimulating, enlightening, and powerful."²⁰ Over the intervening years, few anthologies surpassed its scope and vision and it remained highly influential, and a model for future ground-breaking anthologies.²¹ By 1969, when Arno re-issued *The Negro Caravan*, radical scholar Julius Lester in his introduction wrote that "it comes as close today as it did in 1941 to being the most important single volume of black writing ever published."²²

The Negro Caravan included writing from a wide period (mid nineteenth century to 1940) and from many genres - short stories, extracts from novels, poetry, folk songs, autobiographical writing, folklore and drama. Brown and his fellow editors, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, adopted a democratic and inclusive approach to the literature, and particularly emphasised the degree to which black folklore had affected the development of black (and white) American culture. The organisation of the anthology and the insightful introductions to each thematic section imply that with the support of other black intellectuals, Brown could provide a highly sophisticated analysis that demonstrated the vitality of black culture.

Very little of Brown's poetry was accessible to readers between the 1940s and the 1970s as his only published collection *Southern Road* was out of print. It was not until Detroit's Broadside Press issued *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems* in 1975 that Brown began to reemerge as a

¹⁸ T. N., "Book Review – *The Negro Caravan*," *Phylon* (1940-1956) 3, 2 (1942): 225-26.

¹⁹ Guy B. Johnson, "Book Review - *The Negro Caravan*," *Social Forces* 20, 4 (1942): 511.

²⁰ Read Bain, "Book Review – *The Negro Caravan*," *American Sociological Review* 8, 1 (1943): 108. *The Negro Caravan* influenced anthologies such as *Cavalcade* (1971), *A Chant of Saints* (1979), and *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (1995).

²¹ Jennifer Jordan, "Arthur P. Davis: Forging the Way for the Formation of the Canon," *Callaloo* 20, 2 (1997): 450-60; Fahamisha Patricia Brown, "And I Owe It All to Sterling Brown: The Theory and Practice of Black Literary Studies," *African American Review* 31, 3 (1997): 449-53; Deborah H. Barnes, "'The Elephant and the Race Problem:' Sterling A. Brown and Arthur P. Davis as Cultural Conservators," *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998): 985-97.

²² Brown, *The Negro Caravan*.

significant figure in the black cultural landscape. Between 1942 and the early 1970s, Brown's appearances in print were very limited. "The Negro Author and his Publisher" which focused on the challenges for black authors in getting into print was published in the early 1940s.²³ "Out of their Mouths," a story written for *A Negro Looks at the South*, appeared in a special edition of *Survey Graphic* called "Color: Unfinished Business of Democracy." Co-editing alongside Paul Kellogg, Brown's old mentor Alain Locke wrote to him to confirm that

the idea is to document in this way things that if said polemically could not get over. Also to disabuse the average Caucasian notion that all Negroes think as well as look alike.²⁴

As noted in chapter five, other stories that he planned to publish in *A Negro Looks at the South* appeared in Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling's journal *The South Today*, and in *The Record Changer*. In *Phylon*, the journal that W. E. B. Du Bois had established at Atlanta University in 1940, Brown also published sporadically on folklore and music.²⁵ Brown published essays in collections edited by his colleagues from Howard University, the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and historian Rayford W. Logan.²⁶

Brown's cachet remained high and he remained busy throughout the 1940s. He was finally made a full professor at Howard in September 1942. He made a contribution to Charles S. Johnson's *Patterns of Negro Segregation* in 1943. On a personal level, he had a difficult few years with bereavements of close family members and his correspondence suggests that his ability to meet deadlines, never strong, faltered further. He was unable to organise himself to meet deadlines and in recognition of this, he hired an agent. His correspondence also shows an unceasing stream of demands on his time and energy - letters, requests to speak, chasing chapters of books, discussing

²³ Brown, "The Negro Author and His Publisher," 146.

²⁴ Alain Locke to Sterling A. Brown, 20 Aug 1942, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

²⁵ Brown, "Out of Their Mouths."; "Words on a Bus."; "Farewell to Basin Street."; "Georgia Nymphs."; "Georgia Sketches."; "The Muted South."; "And/Or."; "Stray Notes on Jazz," *Vassar Brew* 27 (1946); "Spirituals, Blues and Jazz: The Negro in the Lively Arts," *Tricolor* 3 (1945); "The Approach of the Creative Artist," *Journal of American Folklore* 59 (1946); "Negro Folk Expression."; "The Blues."; "Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs."

²⁶ "Count Us In."; "Athletics and the Arts," in *The integration of the Negro into American society, papers presented to the fourteenth Annual Conference of the Division of the Social Sciences, May 3 and 4, 1951*, ed. E. Franklin Frazier (Washington: Howard University Press, 1951).

rights to poetry, possible publishing deals, and radio shows. The 1950s saw little activity. There were failed projects with Benjamin Botkin (*Treasury of Negro Folklore*) and with music writer Charles Edward Smith. In the mid 1960s, he worked with historian Rayford Logan to write the history of Howard University but he made little progress and was instructed to return to his professorial duties in the English department in September 1965.²⁷ He retired in 1969.

Even during the period of Brown's greatest success, there were developments underway that would undermine his credibility. As I have demonstrated, the promotion of notions of detachment, objectivity and professional training in the social sciences affected the extent to which Brown's ideas about black culture could be accepted as valid. Although he was knowledgeable about black folklore, black history and black life in the South, he was a 'layman' in a period where increasingly one had to be a professionally trained 'expert' in folklore, sociology or history for one's views to be taken as valid. As professional boundaries hardened, the era of the great polymaths that had preceded Brown, like W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, came to an end.

Black intellectuals also had to decide whether to stay in segregated universities or jostle for positions in white schools, universities or research organisations. Although Brown was sought out for posts at Vassar (a white liberal arts college where he was visiting professor in the autumn terms of 1945 and 1946.) and encouraged to consider taking up a position at Brandeis University, he chose to remain at Howard.²⁸ He feared that in a move to a white institution, he would lose touch with black communities and the inspiration for his writing. His friend at *Opportunity*, editor Elmer Carter wrote to him to say:

I suppose that it would give you greater prestige in the academic world

²⁷ Stanley L. Wormley, Acting President of Howard University to Sterling A. Brown, 22 Jul 1965, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

²⁸ Stephen E. Henderson, "Sterling A. Brown: Poet, Scholar Is Honored as Great American Original," *Ebony* (1976): 130; Stanley Burnshaw to Sterling A. Brown, 3 Feb 1948, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC, Box 10, Folder B.

but whether the adjustment would rob you of the contact which would add color and life to your creative efforts, I for one cannot say.²⁹

The decision to remain at Howard affected his profile for, as Jonathan Scott Holloway stresses, “recognition from white institutions” was considered to be “the best barometer for the viability of blacks’ ideas.” At a white institution, Brown would be faced with other barriers summarised by Holloway: the faculty’s assumption that he would serve as a spokesperson for the black community, and their tendency to take black scholars seriously only in relation to ‘the Negro.’³⁰ That these were concerns that preoccupied Brown is evident in a letter sent to him by his friend Stanley Burnshaw: “I think I know what you are up against as ambassador to Vassar ...there seems to be no solution for the predicament that often strikes the relatively few “outstanding representatives” of any fighting group.”³¹

In 1963, John Hope Franklin set out the dilemma of African American scholars, forced by the racism of white institutions, academics and funding bodies to concentrate on ‘Negro studies.’³² Nearly thirty years later, in response to a book review in which C. Vann Woodward insinuated that Franklin had been recruited to Duke specifically to to teach one of the Black Studies programmes then moving into mainstream academia, Franklin stated that he had not taught African American history in the previous 25 years “only because I chose to ‘integrate’ white and African American history of the South.” He emphasised that his recruitment to Duke (in 1982) was to teach whatever he wished, and he reminded readers that “most African American scholars went into so called black studies, not by choice but by the force of white racism that dictated the nature of scholarship, as it did in virtually all other aspects of American life.”³³

Like his contemporaries, Brown, as a black intellectual, was forced to operate against the constraints of “socially and historically specific expectations and

²⁹ Elmer Carter to Sterling A. Brown, 18 Nov 1946, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC.

³⁰ Holloway, “The Black Intellectual and the “Crisis Canon” in the Twentieth Century,” 4.

³¹ Stanley Burnshaw to Sterling A. Brown, 3 Feb 1948.

³² John Hope Franklin, “The Dilemma of the Negro Scholar,” in *Race and History: Selected Essays 1938-1988*, ed. John Hope Franklin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 299.

³³ “‘Illiberal Education’: An Exchange. George M. Fredrickson, John Hope Franklin, Jon Wiener, Gene H. Bell-Villada, and Clyde De L. Ryals, Et Al,” *The New York Review of Books*, 26 Sep 1991.

institutional structures.”³⁴ His decision to remain in the conservative English Department at Howard until his retirement in 1969 was restricting. He was confined to a curriculum comprised of [white] American literature, described by Michael Thelwell as “classic American establishment” and “enforced assimilationist mediocrity.”³⁵ Although he was an influential mentor to students in terms of folk culture and civil rights in the 1960s, his position with the administration became very difficult in that decade. John H. Bracey recollects that faculty who were seen as supportive of activist students were suppressed.³⁶ New bureaucratic rules in terms of performance management were introduced and he had a tense relationship with the departmental head until his retirement.³⁷ It would not be until the early 1970s, when he was temporarily restored to the faculty post-retirement by Stephen Henderson that Brown could formally pass on the rich knowledge he had informally disseminated for decades.

The relationship with white liberals, whether northern or southern, was complex. With Botkin and Alsberg, Brown shared a vision of a pluralistic culture. With liberals such as Melville Herskovits, dialogue was difficult as Herskovits seemed unable or unwilling to grasp the complexity of arguments about black culture, its origins and its development and the consequences for black Americans of ‘getting it wrong’ and contributing to the continuation of jaded stereotypes, and to notions of black inferiority and ‘the Negro’ as alien and ‘other’ rather than as an American. When it came to southern white liberals such as newspaper editor Jonathan W. Daniels, whatever constructive dialogue may have existed in the 1930s had virtually disappeared by the 1940s as Daniels and his contemporaries in the South could neither conceive of a desegregated South nor conceptualise a future that would be shaped, not by their paternalistic guidance and leadership, but by the activism of black Americans themselves.

³⁴ Stanley Burnshaw to Sterling A. Brown, 3 Feb 1948. Brandeis was a new Jewish-sponsored secular university that would welcome students of all religions and races.

³⁵ Steven C. Tracy, “A Conversation with John H. Bracey, Esther Terry, and Mike Thelwell,” in *After Winter: Essays on the Art and Life of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 403, 04.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 408.

³⁷ Lance Jeffers to Sterling A. Brown, Undated, Sterling A. Brown Papers, MSRC. Letter from Jeffers about Brown’s poor treatment at Howard by the Head of Department.

After the Second World War, much of America settled into a period of affluence. The 1930s had seen a swell of interracial support for black civil rights but it was associated with the Left. As anti-communism increased, intellectuals had to make a choice: either distance themselves from their previous affiliations or live with the anxiety of being branded a 'Red.' The Left had supported black civil rights but those who continued to do so could be accused of communism. There is evidence that even those peripherally involved in the Popular Front like Sterling Brown were anxious. On 31 March 1942, Brown was interviewed by the FBI and gave a signed statement.³⁸ He had committed no crime but undoubtedly the fact that in 1939 Republican Congressman Frank Keefe had cited his essay on "The Negro in Washington" as evidence of communist influence within the state guidebooks would have added to suspicions that he was a subversive. Just a week later, Benjamin Botkin was brought into the FBI's offices and interviewed. Brown and Botkin were on the mailing lists of various organisations that the FBI considered to be subversive and had been members of the League of American Writers. There was a further 'Red Scare' in 1952 and the loyalty of all federal employees was investigated. Brown was interviewed on 7 May 1953.³⁹ Botkin was no longer a federal employee but a professional FBI informant had named him and he was re-interviewed in January 1954. Historian Susan G. Davis has corresponded with Botkin's children, who noticed fearfulness and a decline in self-confidence in Botkin in the 1950s, which they felt was likely a result of the FBI investigations, although they had known nothing about the investigation at the time.⁴⁰ Botkin never spoke about its effect and Brown made only a jocular reference to it in old age but the very real fear of losing his job or being prosecuted may have contributed to his silence in this period.

News of Stalin's atrocities and purges against his alleged internal enemies split the American Left in the late 1930s and the Nazi-Soviet Pact alienated

³⁸ Report: Sterling Allen Brown under Internal Security Hatch Act by Special Agent in Charge, Washington D.C., 1 Apr 1942, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bureau File 101-1381.

³⁹ Report: Sterling Allen Brown under Security Matter - C Labor - Federal Security Appropriations Act of 1953 by Special Agent in Charge, Washington D.C., 18 May 1953, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bureau File 101-1381.

⁴⁰ Davis, "Ben Botkin's FBI File," 3-30.

many. The spread and strength of fascism brought about a fear of totalitarianism that made left-wing writers and activists anxious. Intellectuals moved away from mass and popular culture to think about individual liberties and the rise of a bureaucratic society. Formerly Left-wing intellectuals turned away from what they saw as the naïveté of the Popular Front era.⁴¹ As Lawrence P. Jackson notes, the willingness of former liberals such as Lionel Trilling “to erect a myth of liberal America” where “a broad public sensibility of fairness and ethical judgement abounded” and his exhortations that writers should move away from social realism to focus on “possibility” and “optimism” was a bitter pill for black writers to swallow.⁴²

Although there were some within the black arts movement who saw the value of Brown’s scholarship,⁴³ the separatism of the black power movement in the late 1960s gave rise to humiliating public denouncements of Brown’s generation of black intellectuals. Ironically, given the struggles Brown and his black intellectual allies had undergone in their attempts to articulate a positive black identity to white intellectuals and a wider audience, they were now repudiated for what was seen as their eagerness to integrate with whites. A new generation of black intellectuals promoted a political stance that devalued earlier interracial efforts. They portrayed their predecessors in the 1930s and 1940s as conservatives, perceived their attitudes to white intellectuals as meek and subservient, and considered that they had failed to develop a social vision or strategy for black Americans. Thus, Harold Cruse rejected them:

Negro intellectuals of the period were unable to fashion for themselves an independent social philosophy predicated on politics, economics, cultural arts and [Richard] Wright’s ‘nationalist implications’.⁴⁴

Paula Giddings recollected that with the arrival of the Black Arts Movement, she and many others could not understand Brown’s attitude:

⁴¹ Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams : Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 349-54.

⁴² Jackson, *The Indignant Generation : A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*, 6.

⁴³ Henderson, "A Strong Man Called Sterling Brown."

⁴⁴ Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 186.

Brown ... had no interest in a movement that attempted to separate blacks from the skin of mainstream American culture, a position that so many of us crudely interpreted as unmodern and even worse, reactionary.⁴⁵

As this thesis has evidenced, Brown believed that black Americans would be accepted on their own terms, without shedding any part of their own culture or heritage. It was not to be a trade-off, but a growing recognition of the value of each race's part in developing a vibrant and democratic American culture.

‘An Integer is a Whole Number’

Although Sterling Brown's reputation has ebbed and flowed since the 1950s, he exerted a powerful influence on subsequent generations throughout his forty years at Howard and beyond.

Ossie Davis attended Howard from 1936 to 1939, when Brown's profile as poet and critic were high. Davis would go on to become a renowned director, producer and civil rights activist. He recalled Brown's impact on his development:

Sterling knew all about John Henry, Br'er Rabbit, and High John the Conqueror.... His take on the black experience was priceless, and his criticism helped many of us to begin to form our own opinions. He was against cant, false pretense, and Uncle Tomism in places high and low. His laughter encouraged us to laugh, but also taught us how to be selective in our laughter It was Sterling who taught me that the blues were poetry, and that the stories I knew so well from my own childhood were first-class literature.⁴⁶

By the time Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) studied English at Howard in the early 1950s, Brown's celebrity had waned. Baraka remembered that at the

⁴⁵ David L. Smith, "A Symposium on the Life and Work of Sterling Brown," *Callaloo* 21, 4 (1998): 1044.

⁴⁶ Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby : In This Life Together* (New York: William Morrow, 1998), 81-83.

time, “I didn’t know who Sterling Brown was,” but he subsequently realised that Brown was a “profound teacher.”

He taught us about music. He took us home, me and A. B. Spellman, and sat us down in front of his gigantic library of records, labeled, pigeonholed, referenced, by genre, period. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Fletcher Henderson. That kind of specific, historiographic—I’d never had that kind of understanding.⁴⁷

Baraka described Brown’s influence on his decision to write about the folk origins of modern black music, which produced his seminal study *Blues People*.⁴⁸ Among others, Brown also taught and influenced novelist Toni Morrison, and political activist Kwame Ture (then Stokeley Carmichael).⁴⁹ In his autobiography, Ture noted:

Prof helped us to see clearly at least one of the things that we really were fighting *for*: in the largest possible sense, to preserve and advance a legacy – our people’s humanity as expressed in terms of their own devising.⁵⁰

Although Brown and his contemporaries struggled to assert their authority because of segregation and prejudice, they never lost sight of the fact that black Americans had the right to full inclusion in American society and culture. Sterling Brown was an early pioneering example of what Marable defines as a ‘transformationist’: he sought to eradicate the power of race as an ideology and as a means of structuring power. He did so, firstly, by enabling a dynamic black cultural identity that celebrated the folk forms that emanated

⁴⁷ Imamu Amiri Baraka and Van Gosse, "Home Rules: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," *Radical History Review* 87, 1 (2003): 120.

⁴⁸ Baraka quoted in Eugene Holley Jr., "Black History Meets Black Music: 'Blues People' at 50," in *A Blog Supreme* (NPR Jazz, 2013); LeRoi Jones, *Blues People. Negro Music in White America* (MacGibbon & Kee: London, 1965); Brown did not think much of Baraka's book on the Blues as a history of the music and the people but saw it as a "kind of declaratory ... statement for a certain kind of freedom for the Negro artist." Rowell and Brown, "'Let Me Be Wid Ole Jazzbo': An Interview with Sterling A. Brown."

⁴⁹ Brown's influence on Morrison's thinking is evident in Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Jackson, *The Indignant Generation : A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*, 37; Stokeley Carmichael and Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution : The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Schuster, 2003).

⁵⁰ *Ready for Revolution : The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*, 134-35.

out of African American experiences – slavery, segregation, discrimination – and resisted any notion of uplift which disparaged folk expression. Secondly, he used his critical abilities to destroy the language of inferiority that was employed to perpetuate racial inequality.⁵¹ Brown adapted whatever tools were at his disposal to achieve these ends: poetry, literary criticism, sociological methodologies, journalism and teaching.

At the height of the Black Power movement at a point when a minority of black intellectuals were coming to reevaluate his work and to understand its pioneering nature, Brown emphasised his own values in expressing his right to full American citizenship:

I am an integrationist, though that is an ugly word, because I know what segregation really was. And by integration, I do not mean assimilation. I believe what the word means – an integer is a whole number. I want to be in the best American traditions. I want to be accepted as a whole man. My standards are not white. My standards are not black. My standards are human.⁵²

⁵¹ Marable, "History and Black Consciousness: The Political Culture of Black America," 227.

⁵² Brown and Sanders, *A Son's Return : Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*.

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